THE LEGEND OF THE FAN AND THE SHIT THAT HIT IT

ALBA PRATALIA

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The Ethan stories

that build up to no plot, so don't bother trying to find one

by Alba Pratalia

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ETHAN'S FIRST WEEK

ETHAN'S FIRST

How is he doing?

So, enter: Eathan. Let's see how he does in his first narrative assignment.

Ethan lifted his glass—not to drink, just to give it a little swirl, like he was checking if the whisky had any gossip to offer. It didn't. It was as blank as he felt, which is why he was on either his second or his eighth. Numbers had stopped consenting to be counted an hour ago.

The door creaked the way doors do when they want attention, and in came a man with the sort of gait that whispered, *I have a backstory you won't like.* Ethan clocked it instantly. Not paranoia—just that veteran sixth sense that life has trained into him like a badly paid internship.

The guy walked with a suspicious talk. You know the type: every step says *I'm about to say something cringe,* every gesture is pre-lubricated with self-importance. His aura was basically a podcast no one wants to be a guest on.

Then the man put a cap on. Not just any cap, no. The cap. Navy-blue acrylic, embroidery bright enough to cause retinal trauma: a military ship silhouette, bold yellow letters arcing proudly, two little laurel leaves like someone had stapled victory to a lie.

Ethan, mid-sip, paused. "Oh here we go," he thought—or maybe said out loud. Hard to tell.

The barman, whose emotional range spanned from Mildly Tired to Mildly Tired But Polite, perked up.

"Oh, thank you for your service, sir. First drink's on the house."

Ethan's eyebrows did a slow, sarcastic climb toward orbit. Because of course. Of course the guy bought himself a pre-fabricated thank-you.

The man touched the brim of his heroic hat like a low-budget general. "Much obliged," he muttered, performing gratitude like a badly rehearsed school play.

Ethan sighed into his glass. Terrible omen. Hat Guy was the sort who'd eventually sidle closer and start a conversation. The universe loved pushing these types toward Ethan, like cosmic matchmaking but meaner.

Sure enough, Hat Guy turned, scanned the bar, and locked onto Ethan like a Roomba spotting a wall to crash into.

Ethan whispered to his drink, "I really should stop going outside."

The waitresses chimed in—two of them, synchronized like malfunctioning Teletubbies at a cult meeting.

“Thank you for your service!”
“Thank you for your service!”

Their smiles were wide, empty, and aggressively laminated. Ethan felt his soul do a backflip out of disgust.

He pivoted on the stool, whisky sloshing dangerously—fine, theatrically. He’d earned theatrics.

“Oh **fuck** your service,” he announced, like he was delivering a toast at the world’s worst wedding.

The waitresses froze. Hat Guy blinked. The barman whispered something to a lime wedge.

Ethan held up a finger—professorial, except drunk and irritated.

"Fuck *you.*
Fuck your **free drink.**
Fuck that little bathtub you drew on your cap—whatever ship that's supposed to be, looks like something toddlers sail in a pool."

Hat Guy's mouth opened to protest but Ethan was rolling now, a downhill bowling ball made of grievance.

"And fuck the whole idea of the military, you bunch of bargain-bin Spartans. Thank **me** for my service. Yeah, you heard me."

He jabbed himself in the chest. The whisky trembled in his other hand like it wanted no part of this.

"Thank *me* and people like me who've been screaming peace since the moment our brains sprouted a working neuron.
Thank *me* for trying to keep you from killing or

getting killed while you LARP glory in embroidered polyester."

Silence. The bar was a vacuum chamber.

Ethan leaned in, voice dry as a desert argument.

"You're all a pack of war-addicted, flag-sniffing disaster-hobbyists. Every last one. Congratulations."

Hat Guy looked like he was about to say something heroic. Ethan prayed he wouldn't—mostly because he didn't want to hear another syllable from that cap.

And then, very softly, he added to his drink:

"See? This is what happens when you draw me into society."

The barman marched over with the solemnity of a man delivering a eulogy for a goldfish. He plucked Ethan's glass away mid-orbit, like confiscating

contraband from a child who wasn't even playing with it properly.

"We respect the forces here," he declared, puffing up like a patriotic pufferfish. "And we reserve the right to refuse service to those who don't."

Ethan rose from the stool, hands lifted skyward as if surrendering to stupidity itself.

"Well," he announced, "guess who's glad **not** to be a patron of this fascist establishment!"

A couple of customers gasped. One dropped a fork. Hat Guy clutched his heroic bathtub-cap like it was the last cupcake at a toddler's birthday party.

Ethan strutted toward the door, indignation oozing out of him like steam escaping a busted kettle. Every footstep was a protest. Every breath was a subpoena. He didn't walk out—he evacuated himself from the premises.

The door swung shut behind him with that satisfying *you-are-henceforth-banished* thump.

Two steps down the curb, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

And grinned.

"Guess who skipped another bar tab," he whispered to the night, proud as sin, smug as a cat that just stole a chicken leg and blamed the dog.

He kept walking, pockets full of unpaid whisky and zero regrets. The universe, for once, applauded with a breeze.

It wasn't his first tab-free exit, and the universe knew damn well it wouldn't be the last. Ethan had it down to an art form: bartender refuses to keep serving "the hater," Ethan walks out with his moral superiority flapping behind him like a badly folded cape… and the bill evaporates into the ether. Classic.

He had a whole portfolio of greatest hits.

There'd been the time he unloaded on the Orthodox Jewish guy in full Hasidic regalia—peyots bouncing like accusatory springs—calling him a murderer, a genocide cheerleader for the crimes in Palestine. Ethan did it calmly, clinically, like diagnosing a virus. The man had fled. Ethan's tab had stayed behind. Nobody dared ask him to pay it.

Then the Catholic priest. Ethan had barely let the man finish blessing his soup before he jabbed a finger and said, "Yeah yeah, Father, save it—how many kids have you failed to save? Or touched? Or covered for? Huh?"
The priest evaporated like incense. The barman took Ethan's drink away. Ethan strolled out, tab-free and humming.

The hipster? Oh, that one was easy. Ethan had roasted him for being a "fucking artisanal cocksucker hipster," which—admittedly—wasn't even about geopolitics or ethics; that was just pure

aesthetic revulsion. Man-bun, suspenders, IPA-musk. Reflex reaction. They kicked Ethan out.
Ethan skipped the tab. Nature healed.

And then, of course, the pièce de résistance: the MAGA hat guy, the American exceptionalist onion with layers of rage and cholesterol.
Ethan had sat *on purpose* next to him.
Had *on purpose* discussed the structural integrity of border walls.
Had *on purpose* compared rifle calibers like a man listing wines.

The guy loved him. Bought every single one of Ethan's drinks. Called him "brother."
Ethan, feeling both victorious and vaguely dirty, had nodded along until he felt the urge to shower.

Two birds. One stone. Every time.

✓ Venting his pure, unfiltered, unpasteurized disdain at whatever group symbolically represented

the day's moral dysentery.
✓ Free drinks.

Ethan was a terrible person, maybe. But also an efficient one. And in the dark little economy of his nights, that counted for something.

Ethan had even had a **sequel** to one of his priest-rants—like a bonus track nobody asked for.

He'd just finished calling a Catholic padre a "walking child-abuse cover-up in a cassock," got his drink confiscated, and was halfway out the door plotting his next unpaid cocktail when another patron intercepted him.

Big guy. Red face. That **I-lift-tires-for-fun** build. He stepped right into Ethan's path and growled:

"Hey, buddy. I didn't like any of that. I'm a Christian too."

Ethan didn't miss a beat. Not even a hiccup.

“Oh yeah?” he said. “Well **forgive me**, then.”

And he walked out.

Later he admitted—fine, yes—it was straight-up stolen from Bill Hicks.
But some jokes are like emergency fire extinguishers: break glass when necessary, deploy instantly, ask forgiveness never.

And anyway, Ethan always figured if a line is that good, it deserves field work.

Ethan stagger-marched down the sidewalk, still riding the chemical high of righteous fury and fiscal irresponsibility. The night air was cool, crisp, and just smug enough to provoke him.

He pointed at the empty space in front of him—like scolding an invisible intern.

“Now tell me,” he announced to nobody, “who **decided** I’m the ‘lighter’ one?”

He stabbed the air again for emphasis.

"Who decided I'm different from Nathan? Huh? Who made that call? I want names."

A pause. A dramatic tilt of the head. The streetlight flickered, wisely staying out of it.

"I'm supposed to have this—what was it?—this *unmistakable Addendum.*" He wiggled his fingers like conjuring a ghost.
"'A faint aura of *I swear I'm trying this time*.' That's what they say I have."

He snorted, loud enough to scare a pigeon into atheism.

"And Nathan gets *'I will absolutely set fire to this room.'*"

He stopped walking, squared himself to the world like it owed him a duel.

“I will absolutely set fire to the whole **building** just for a laugh,” he informed the universe, deeply offended.
“Who decided I’m less dark-minded?
Who decided I’m some kind of diet sociopath?
A lighter shade of unhinged?
The *decaf* version?”

He scoffed, hands on his hips, the international pose of a man ready to commit light arson.

“Just wait and see,” he muttered, cracking his neck with villainous ambition.

Then, with perfect comedic inevitability, he held an imaginary drink out to the cosmos.

“Here,” he said. “Hold my beer.”

The universe, wisely, did not.

So, dear reader, that wrapped up Ethan's **first official narration assignment**—and he slammed the door behind it with all the grace of a raccoon stealing a baguette.

How did he do, dear reader?

☆☆☆☆☆

"Chaotic good with a sprinkle of property damage."
Ethan is like a Yelp review that learned how to drink. Unstable but weirdly insightful. Took off one star because I'm pretty sure he owes me a whisky.

☆☆☆☆☆

"Finally, an honest man."
I've never related to someone skipping bar tabs so aggressively. I laughed, I winced, I questioned my

own moral compass. 10/10 would watch him insult clergy again.

“Too angry, not enough plot.”

This felt like being trapped in a taxi with a furious philosopher who’s also very drunk. I appreciate the passion, but my ears are still ringing.

“Borderline feral. Loved it.”

Ethan radiates the energy of a man who would absolutely steal your lighter while lecturing you on pacifism. A modern hero.

“He yelled at me and I wasn’t even in the story.”

I don’t know why I feel insulted, but I do. I want compensation.

☆☆☆☆☆

“Would let him ruin my evening again.”

He should come with warning labels and free peanuts.

And like any true performer, Ethan will ignore all criticism and double down.

Stay tuned.

ETHAN'S SECOND

Ethan twirled the glass like it owed him rent. The wine sloshed around with the enthusiasm of a bored saint—so, none—while he leaned back, spine doing that slow-motion protest it always did at the end of a day spent surviving humanity.

He took a sip. Let it sit on his tongue like he was auditioning for "Man Who Pretends to Taste Notes He Can't Actually Taste."

"Mah," he said. "Boh."
The universal syllables of a man who's too tired to hate the universe but still hates its customer service.

Then he looked up—past the bottle, past the rim of the glass, past the dust motes trying their best cosmic-ballet impression—and aimed his voice at the air like it owed him an explanation.

"If you've never been treated like the village idiot by the people who grin like accomplices,

if you've never loathed your own carbon footprint for having the audacity to exist,
if you've never slept exclusively in the company of nightmares—never a good dream, not even a half-assed 'fine, whatever' dream,
if you've never felt physical recoil at the mere requirement of interacting with other upright mammals,
if you've never been scolded for 'social deficiencies' like someone grading your soul's homework,
if you've never felt a migraine of the spirit when every failure you've ever birthed decides to hold a surprise reunion in your skull,
if you've never spoken in public with a pee stain proudly glowing like the world's saddest badge of honor—and stayed fully, painfully aware of it…

then tell me, honestly—
have you ever actually *been*?"

He paused. The wineglass didn't answer. It was busy pretending to be deep.

“Yeah,” Ethan muttered. “That’s what I thought.”

Four bottles in, Ethan’s vowels were melting, consonants slipping off his tongue like they’d unionized and gone on strike. The room had become one of those late-night diners where every object judges you silently, especially the furniture.

He spoke to the void. The void pretended not to know him.

“I’d like to know,” he slurred with ceremonial gravitas, “who says I’m not Nathan. I’d like to see their faces. Their **faces**, void. Show me the roster.”

He paused as if the universe might hand him a clipboard.

“Mah… boh…”
He let the syllables droop out of his mouth like wet laundry.

“You know what they call me?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “A *noble sportsman*. Because I’m not

competitive. Because I always concede the point or the game or the argument or the whole damn battle for my life. 'Sportsman.' Ah, yes. A majestic gazelle." He tapped his chest. "Except I'm more of a limping sloth that smoked three packs inside a coal mine at midnight while losing a race to a dead snail."

He wagged a finger at his invisible audience. "It's not sportsmanship. It's not-bothering-anymore-ship. That's the boat I'm on. The HMS I-Did-My-Time."

He took a long swallow of wine straight from the bottle, skipping the glass as if the glass had betrayed him earlier.

"In **every** competition in my life—every single one—I never won once. The kind where you can lose? I lost. The kind where you technically *can't* lose? I also lost, creatively. The universe said, 'Here's a game where it's literally impossible to lose,' and I said, 'Challenge accepted,' and cratered it."

He leaned back, eyes half-closed, voice thinning into a brittle ribbon.

“So what’s the point in trying? Sure, here, take the point. It was yours anyway. I’ll even toss in the match ball. And the trophy. And the league title. And the naming rights to my self-esteem.”

He sniffed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Sportsmanship… bitch, please.”

Ethan: “So, Nathan sang the blues, eh?
Cute. Very cute.
Well, pardon my Ella Fitzgerald, listen to *this*.”

He grabbed a mic that absolutely did *not* need to exist in this scene, flicked it on, and the autotune slid in like a smooth criminal wearing velvet gloves.

Ethan inhaled as if preparing to deliver a sermon to a congregation of fed-up saints.

Ain’t got a spark in the morning,
Ain’t got that hum in my chest,
Ain’t got that soft little warming,
I ain’t got nothing but the blues.

He lifted one hand dramatically, as though the universe owed him back taxes.

Ain’t got a laugh that’ll surface,
Ain’t got a joy I can use,
Ain’t got a reason or purpose,
I ain’t got nothing but the blues.

The autotune hugged each line like a drunk friend insisting they’re fine.

When trumpets bristle,
I try to whistle—
But nothing lifts off the ground.

Believe me, honey,
No light, no funny,
Since my ever-loving gladness skipped town.

He gave the mic stand a sentimental wobble, the kind that says "please collapse with me."

Ain't got a glow when I'm dreaming,
Ain't got a high I won't lose,
Ain't got a heart that is beaming,
I ain't got nothing but the blues.

The last note warbled like a dying star. Ethan bowed anyway.

"You're welcome, Nathan. Try topping *that* without divine intervention—or, you know, a functioning soul."

A bing-bong chimed through the air like a supermarket announcing **"Cleanup in Aisle Your Ego."**
The void parted. Out stepped the Reader's Voice, wearing the existential equivalent of a Hi-Vis vest.

Reader: "Dude. Really.
Enough with this Nathan comparison contest about

who's got the bigger··· blues catalog. We get it. You're both mega-gifted, alright?"

The void flickered expectantly.

Reader: "O Lord! Ooooh, you're both so *big*! So *absolutely huge*!
Gosh, we're all really impressed down here, I can tell you."

The sarcasm hit the room like a custard pie delivered by divine decree.

Reader: "Now would you kindly—*for Graham Chapman's sake*—
get on with your own damn storyline?"

The void echoed, bing-bonged again out of spite, and the Reader vanished, leaving behind a faint smell of Monty Python and managerial disappointment.

Ethan shrugged with the air of a man folding up a circus tent after the lions union-walked out.

Ethan: "Oh well, I was done anyway. *Nondum matura est, nolo acerbam sumere.*"

A beat.
The void blinked like a confused goldfish.

Reader (back again): "What's that?"

Ethan: "Nothing. Just praising back your girth too."

Reader: "…That sounded like Latin."

Ethan waved a hand, missed, tried again.

Ethan: "It was not. Was not. Assure you. I've got a cold. Makes me declension-ish."

He sniffed theatrically, as if grammar itself were contagious.

Later on.

The bar was one of those dim, forgettable cubes of wood and neon where dignity goes to hibernate. Ethan had just finished a sentence that clearly did

not belong in polite society—so, naturally, it belonged perfectly here.

The man across from him took a sip of his drink, processed Ethan's words, and promptly returned the sip back into his glass like a shocked espresso machine.

"You do *what*?"

Ethan, unfazed, poked the ice in his own glass like he was interrogating it.

Ethan: "I club puppy seals."

The man blinked. Twice. His soul briefly left his body to go fill out a complaint form.

"You club… seal *puppies*?"

Ethan: "No no no, totally different thing. I club puppy *S.E.A.L.s.*"

Silence.
A neuron fired somewhere in the man's brain and immediately regretted it.

"You club… puppies of *special forces*."

Ethan: "Indeed I do."

Now the man was fully glitching, like a corrupted NPC.

"How does—how do—what do—WHAT?"

Ethan leaned in, earnest in the way only a lunatic or a prophet can be.

Ethan: "I take them when they're young. Green. Recently signed into S.E.A.L. training."

The man mouthed a silent prayer to whoever was on shift in the celestial call center.

"And you club them… to *death*?"

Ethan: "Oh no no. Only into *reason*. Into quitting the idea that going somewhere to kill or be killed is a brilliant life plan. I club them into becoming brain surgeons. Or salumieri. Healthy, decent, peace-building individuals."

The man stared as if Ethan had declared he knits sweaters for volcanoes.

"…What… what clubs do you use?"

Ethan swirled his drink with monk-like serenity.

Ethan: "Oh, ask my caddy."

Ethan rested his elbows on the bar like a man preparing to launch a psychological torpedo.

Ethan: "Tell me—have you ever thought about the military as a career?"

His caddy, who absolutely should not have existed in a bar but did anyway, materialized at his side

holding a gleaming club like an angel of questionable competence.

Caddy: "Shall I provide an iron No. 2, Master Ethan?"

The other man—up to now merely confused—suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree finally plugged in.

He raised both hands.
Man: "I am an accountant, have never considered any other career, vote Democrat, advocate for gun control, and cannot even swim."

Ethan turned a single eyebrow toward Igor the Caddy.

Ethan: "Not now, Igor."

Then, to the man—

Ethan: "Figured you couldn't swim by myself, Mr. Brown."

The man froze.

Man: “How do you know my name is Brown?”

Ethan didn’t answer that. Instead, he smiled the smile of a man who shouldn’t smile and said:

Ethan: “May I treat you to another fried chicken and watermelon juice, Mr. Brown?”

The man blinked. Twice.
Man: “That is deeply and disturbingly racist. Also, you might very well—thank you very much.”

Ethan snapped his fingers; the bartender took the order with the air of someone who had stopped resisting reality years ago.

Then Ethan leaned in, locking eyes with Mr. Brown over the glow of the neon signs and the existential hum of the bar fridge.

Ethan: “So… really? Never considered any other career?”

Mr. Brown exhaled through his nose, the way a man does when he's about to confess something that tastes like cardboard.

Mr. Brown: "Have you ever seen that stupid movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*?"

Ethan: "Galactically dumb movie."

Mr. Brown: "Well… I'm what happens after the movie ends."

Ethan blinked. Slowly. Like he was buffering.

Ethan: "…Damn."

Igor the Caddy perked up, lifting a small, murderously polite putter with both hands like a ceremonial dagger.

Igor: "Shall I provide the coup-de-grâce putter, Master?"

Ethan and Mr. Brown both stared at the club.
Then at each other.
Then back at the club.
It hovered, implausibly shiny, thirsty for existential closure.

Mr. Brown thought about it. You could see the gears turning, smoking, threatening a union strike.
Then he shook his head.

Ethan sighed with the resignation of a man who ordered calamari and got therapy.

Ethan: "Not yet, Igor. But don't put the bag away."

Igor stood at attention, putter still raised, ready to bonk someone's life trajectory into a new orbit at a moment's notice.

The waiter approached like a man carrying diplomatic immunity on a tray.
He set the silver-domed cloche before Mr. Brown with the solemnity of a coronation.

The dome lifted.

And if you—yes *you*—have never grasped the pure, uncut, dictionary-definition meaning of "happiness," Mr. Brown's face in that instant was your Rosetta Stone. His soul opened like a time-lapse flower. Choir of calories in four-part harmony. Retina trembling.

Naturally, Igor snapped a photo.

Igor: "For posterity, Master."

The waiter cleared his throat in that delicate way waiters do when announcing something both exquisite and potentially lawsuit-generating.

Waiter: "The chef took the liberty of siding the chicken with fried okra, sautéed collard, and a Kool-Aid reduction… for you, sir."

Mr. Brown's left eyelid twitched.

Before he could speak, the sommelier swooped in with a snifter the size of a small aquarium. He poured in enough Hennessy to pickle a giraffe.

Sommelier: "Compliments of Mr. Ethan, sir."

Mr. Brown's lip quivered.

He was on the verge of tears—
15% for the galactic, high-definition racism on display
and 85% because the plate smelled like redemption, vacation, and choir practice at the same time.

The man was spiritually levitating.
Ethan toasted him with a mellow shrug, as if to say:
this is the least chaotic thing I've done all week.

Ethan lifted his bourbon with the solemnity of a man christening a ship made entirely of bad decisions.

Ethan: "No accountant should go around content to *be* one without some cheer-me-up."

He clinked his glass against the air, because the air had earned it.

Then—because reality had clearly decided to escalate—the waiter swept back in, this time with the theatrical flourish of someone unveiling a royal transformation montage.

He draped an alabaster coat over Ethan's shoulders, smoothing it down like he was dressing a mafia snow angel.
Then came the matching jacket.
Then the careful adjustment of the watch chain on Ethan's vest—exactly the sort of chain that says *I both know the time and refuse to respect it.*
Then, finally, the pièce de résistance: a ludicrously huge white hat, the kind worn by men with opinions about bourbon purity, riverboats, and dueling rights.

A cane, carved and polished, was placed in Ethan's hand like a scepter.

The waiter bowed and departed without a word, as if this ritual had been foretold on ancient linen.

Igor stepped forward, reverent as a monk delivering scripture, and offered Ethan a rolled-up leather whip.

Ethan, without moving his lips more than a millimeter, waved it away.
A whisper—a conspiratorial breeze:

Ethan: "Not yet, Igor… not yet."

Igor nodded, understanding perfectly, because of course he did.

Somewhere in the bar, Mr. Brown took another bite of chicken and wondered if he'd died without noticing.

Igor glided to Mr. Brown's side carrying yet another tray, dome shining like a guilty conscience. He lifted it with flourish.

Inside:
Raw. Cotton. Balls.

Igor leaned in, voice soft as a villain's bedtime story.

Igor: "For you. Here. Pick some."

Mr. Brown made a noise best described as *existential whiplash*.
Before anyone could process the cosmic level of "nope" happening at that table—

BING-BONG

The void yawned open again like an annoyed automatic door, and the Reader's Voice stepped out, arms crossed, eyes narrowed, energy reading "I have absolutely had it."

Reader: "Okay. Nope. This has gone too far already, even for me. I draw the line *here*. You can go back to the Nathan-size-comparison nonsense, but *this* ends here."

Ethan looked genuinely baffled—rare, but not impossible.

Ethan: "For *this*? Come on, this is homeopathic racism. I'll do much worse along my narrative."

Reader: "Oh yeah? Well, that better happen while I'm *sleeping*, not while I'm *reading*."

Ethan: "That doesn't make any sense."

Reader: "Well… *you* don't make any sense."

Mr. Brown raised a timid hand.

Mr. Brown: "Nothing in this makes sense."

Igor placed a gentle, solemn hand on his shoulder, like a therapist with a questionable license.

Igor: "Shhh… there there… here, pick some cotton."

Mr. Brown stared at the cotton. The cotton stared back.

Somewhere in the universe, a moral compass spun so fast it unscrewed itself and flew into the sun.

This time the bing-bong didn't just upgrade—
it **went full monarchy**.

The air quivered, then:

DING—DONG—DANG—DING—DONG—DANG—DING—DONG.

Not a supermarket.
Not a void.
Big Ben himself kicked the door in.

And then *I* stepped out—Alba Pratalia, yes, me, the authoress, in first person, in the flesh, materializing right into the middle of this derailed circus—wearing a British Army No. 2 Dress uniform so sharply pressed it could commit minor assault.

I planted my boots, hands behind my back like a captain inspecting troops who have done everything wrong since sunrise.

Pratalia (me): "Silly, silly, silly. We did this already. We *did* the racist bit and the plantation-coronel aesthetic in *Pick pick pick*. The Igor character is obviously Giuda from *Venerdì 12*, Leo Ortolani era. And calling him Igor—Ethan, please—straight from *Young Frankenstein*?"
I pointed at him.
"Ethan! You have no fantasy."

He pointed right back at me, wounded theatrically.

Ethan: "Me?"

Pratalia: "A character is the author's mirror."

Ethan squinted, tilted his head, and let the punchline drop like a bowling ball falling off a shelf.

Ethan: "Oh, yes. The little sloth bitch."

I nodded, accepting this as if it were a military commendation.

Pratalia: “Precisely. So, from now on, try and be original.”

Ethan blinked. Twice.

Ethan: “Me? That makes no sense.”

I leaned forward, finger at his forehead like I was booping a misbehaving kitten.

Pratalia: “Oh yeah? Well… *you* don’t make any sense.”

And with that, the Big Ben chime reversed itself—
DONG—DING—DANG—DONG—DING—DANG—DONG—DING—
rewinding the universe like a VHS tape being bullied.

I dissolved back behind the writing board, uniform and all, leaving a faint smell of tea, ink, and narrative authority.

Back to you, boys.

Ethan exhaled like a man who had just watched his own creator descend from the heavens to insult him in person and then leave without paying the bill.

Ethan: "Well… Igor, bring the whip."

Igor, ever the butler of questionable implication, stepped forward holding a silver tray with the rolled-up leather whip displayed on it like a Michelin-star dessert.

The waiter immediately swooped in for a wardrobe correction, clearly under strict instructions from Narrative HR.

He plucked off the plantation-coronel ensemble with professional disgust, folded it with the precision of a man erasing evidence, and then—quick as a sleight-of-hand card trick—helped Ethan into a leather jacket and a brown fedora.

Suddenly Ethan wasn't a plantation owner—
he was an adventure professor who drinks too much and should not be trusted around caves.

Ethan took the whip, weighed it in his hand like he expected it to whisper secrets, then snapped his wrist.

CRACK.

The sound echoed through the bar like a time-travel punch.

Mr. Brown froze.
His ancestors collectively stood up inside his DNA.
He very efficiently—**very**—reached for the cotton balls on the tray and gathered them like they were unpaid invoices.

Ethan snapped the whip again—more confidently this time.

Ethan: "Mr. Brown, let's go."

Mr. Brown adjusted his glasses, pure accountant mode activated.

Mr. Brown: "Would the whip be deductible?"

The silence that followed had the texture of a raised eyebrow.

Ethan tucked the whip at his side like a man who absolutely should not own one.

"Depends," he said, "on whether this counts as professional development."

And so it came to pass that the *crusade army*—a term used here with the imaginative generosity of a drunk poet—set off toward unexplored shores:
Ethan in his knockoff-archaeologist drip,
Igor with his silver tray of narrative hazards,
and Mr. Brown clutching cotton balls and a Hennessy-induced sense of destiny.

A soundtrack rose from nowhere:
"Ethan Ethan, León León León—"

whistle
BONG from a bass drum large enough to have its own ZIP code.

They marched like three men who had absolutely no idea where they were going and even less idea why.

From the void—no bing-bong, no courtesy chime, just raw exasperation—my voice (Pratalia) cut in:

Pratalia: "Ethan, for—look, I'm telling you—
1966, Mario Monicelli, *L'armata Brancaleone*.
You're doing a full reenactment, you clown."

Ethan pretended not to hear me.
Which is impressive, considering I literally exist inside his narrative bloodstream.

He raised the whip like he had tenure in chaos.

Ethan: "Forward, my braves! Forward! *Adelante! Si pueden… con juicio.*"

Igor nodded solemnly, Mr. Brown adjusted his accountant tie, and the three of them trudged off toward whatever nightmare I would have to fix later.

Somewhere, Monicelli sighed in his grave.

ETHAN'S THIRD

The demijohn gurgled like a tipsy oracle. Ethan squeezed the rubber tube between two fingers, siphoning another dark, fruity splash into both glasses with the solemnity of a priest refueling the Eucharist. Mr Brown, who did not trust liquids that came in *wicker baskets*, watched the stream with the cautious reverence of a man observing an unfamiliar animal.

Ethan took a long pull, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and leaned in with the posture of someone about to drop a thesis nobody asked for.

"Have you seen how they eat?" he said. "They put bowls in the middle of the table—salad, pasta, meat, bread—and then just… graze. Like free-range humans. They put salad and green beans and

spaghetti on the same plate. As if that combination wasn't declared a war crime at Geneva."

Mr Brown, softly, as if afraid to disturb the divinity of the tablecloth: "That's how we do it at home."

Ethan nodded sagely, which in his case meant he didn't hear a single decibel of that.

"And they have **milk** with it. Milk. With spaghetti."

Mr Brown barely above sea level: "Milk is healthy…"

Ethan ignored him with the intensity of a man swerving a moral obligation. He raised a finger in proclamation.

"There are things," he said, "that are grounds for… The SNIF."

Mr Brown's eyebrows went up like he just heard a jingle promising 20% off detergent *and* eternal

salvation.

“The SNIF?”

Ethan turned theatrical. Arms wide. Eyes blazing. A Barbera-fueled prophet.

“In 1972,” he began, “a crack *culinary* commando unit of Italian grandmothers was exiled from their parish kitchens by a culinary tribunal for a crime they absolutely **did** commit: assault with a deadly rolling pin on a man who put cream in carbonara.”

Mr Brown blinked. Ethan continued.

“These nonne promptly *escaped* from a maximum-security retirement home to the underground trattorie of Naples.

Today, still wanted by the Ministry of Tourism for ‘excessive authenticity enforcement,’ they survive as **cooks of justice** and **soldiers of fortune cookies**—which they despise, by the way.”

He leaned close. Mr Brown leaned back, as one does when history becomes a conspiracy.

“If you have a problem…
If someone is breaking spaghetti to ‘make it fit the pot’…
If your roommate tries making lasagna with *cheddar*…
And if you can find them—”

Ethan snapped his fingers dramatically.

“…maybe you can hire **THE S.N.I.F.**
The Special Nonne Intervention Force.”

The demijohn burbled approvingly.

Mr Brown looked at his glass, then at Ethan, then back at his glass.

“Do they… do they work international cases?”

“Oh absolutely,” Ethan said. “They have diplomatic immunity from the Vatican. Long story. Involves a

bishop, a polenta accident, and one extremely frightened alpaca."

Ethan swirled his glass like a man reviewing battlefield footage.
"You should've *seen* the nonnas," he said, voice dropping to that reverent register people reserve for miracles and tax fraud.

"They didn't *arrive* in the dining room. They **materialised**. Air ripples, light bends, tablecloth does a gentle whoosh like it's welcoming Death in an apron."

Mr Brown swallowed. Not the wine—his dignity.

Ethan pressed on.

"You know De Niro in *The Untouchables*, right? The baseball bat scene? Same energy. Same stance. Same cosmic inevitability. Except swap De Niro for three elderly women with orthopedic shoes… and

swap the bat for rolling pins with the density of collapsed stars."

He raised a hand: the catalogue of carnage.

"Family father?"

BAM.

Rolling pin to the dome. Cranium hits the table like a cracked coconut. Brain matter decorates the salad—now with 100% more authenticity than their cooking ever had.

"Mother?"

BAM.

Her skull goes Jackson Pollock across the wallpaper. The nonnas do not blink. They haven't blinked since 1954.

"Kid n.1?"

BAM.

Full force. The kind of strike that says *'your taste sins echo through generations.'*

“Kid n.2?”

Ethan paused, respectful.

“…mini-BAM. Because she was little. They don’t overdo it. They’re professionals.”

Mr Brown stared at his glass like it suddenly contained the secret of mortality.

Ethan topped him up.

“And that,” he said, “is why you NEVER mix salad with spaghetti. Not because it’s wrong. Because somewhere, in the ether, a nonna is listening… and warming up her rolling pin.”

Brown went pale as Barbera left too long in the sun.

“I should really call my family,” he muttered, fumbling for his phone. “They might be having green beans with mac and chee—”

Ethan’s head snapped up like a wolf smelling heresy.

“Mac *what*?”

Brown's pupils dilated. "Oh no, no, no, I meant—McBurger and cheese. You know. Classic. Totally classic. Very normal. Nobody's melting cheddar on pasta in my home, no sir—"

Ethan didn't answer.
He simply pressed a button under the table.

The wall behind them unfolded like a Bond villain's mood board, revealing a **mega-screen** big enough to shame a small cinema. It flickered on.

There they were.
Brown's wife. His son. His daughter. A wholesome little domestic tableau.
Sitting at the table.
Scooping forkfuls of—

Ethan squinted.
"…is that Kraft powder?"

Brown whimpered. “They must have found the emergency box in the pantry—”

And then—

PUFF.

A displacement of air.
Curtains rustling.
A ripple of lace and righteous fury.

Three nonne materialised *behind* the Brown family, aprons fluttering like war banners.

Brown: “Noooooooo—!”

The nonne didn’t even give him time to inhale his grief.

BANG.
Rolling pin to the wife. Skull pops like a champagne celebration nobody wanted.

BONG.

The son gets it next; vertebrae shuffle like dropped Jenga pieces.

BUNG.

The daughter's head meets the oak table with the soft, final thud of a watermelon that knew this day would come.

Bones crack.

Brains spill.

Silence settles.

Dinner is··· concluded.

The screen flicked to black.

Ethan took a sip of wine, calm as a surgeon who's done this procedure before.

"It was already too late for them," he said.

"Mac and cheese··· they were dead already."

Brown collapsed into sobs, face buried in his hands.

“My family…”

Ethan patted his shoulder with all the tenderness of a man swatting dust off a jacket.

“Better this way. Quick and clean.”

He poured another glass.
For Brown.
For the fallen.
For the nonne.

The demijohn gurgled in agreement.

Igor glided in like a butler who moonlights as an executioner.
A silver tray shimmered under the lights—three tiny glasses and a squat bottle of grappa so strong it could degrease an engine.

“Should I serve the rejoicing grappa, master?” he asked, bowing with that elegant menace only Igor could pull off.

Ethan nodded, benevolent in the way only men with no conscience can be.
“You may, Igor. You may. Both Brown and me.”

Igor poured.
The fumes alone could baptize a corpse.

Brown stared at his glass as if it were a loaded gun with forgiveness engraved on the barrel.

“...Igor,” he croaked, voice shaking, “please bring the coup de grâce putter and send me with my family.”

Igor paused, one eyebrow rising like a guillotine.

Ethan chuckled.
“Nonsense, Brown. We have plenty to do.”

He leaned closer, voice low, matter-of-fact, the way people announce a weather forecast or a long prison sentence.

“Also… those whose family raped the concept of pasta deserve to carry the pain of having seen their family’s skulls shattered in front of them.”
He shrugged. “It’s just right.”

Igor, loyal disciple of chaotic culinary justice, nodded.
“Just right.”

Brown sniffled into his grappa.

Ethan raised his glass.

“To repentance. And to digesting your trauma without cheese sauce.”

Igor clinked.
Brown trembled.
The grappa burned like holy fire.

Outside, somewhere in the night, a rolling pin hummed approval.

Brown collapsed into himself like a folding chair in a hurricane, sobbing into the checkered tablecloth.

“My family… my family… they killed—my family got **rolling-pinned** by a gang of Italian grandmothers…”

The words hit the air like wet laundry; limp, tragic, and slightly absurd.

Ethan clapped him on the back with all the finesse of a forklift.

“Cheer up, Brown! You know what they say: death is but a passage.”

He cleared his throat and declaimed, with the gravitas of a poet performing in a hardware store:

“Death will come and will bear your eyes –
this death of ours, escorting us
from morning until dusk, restless,
deaf, like an old regret

or an unreasonable vice. Your eyes
will be a vain word,
a silent cry, a silence."

He ended the recital by sipping grappa in the most unpoetic way possible.

Igor stepped in, hands folded, expression of mild cosmic boredom.

"Cheer up then, Brown. Worse things happen at sea, you know."
He tilted his head.
"I mean, what've you got to lose? You know, you come from nothing, you're going back to nothing. What have you lost? Nothing!"

Brown lifted his face, blotchy and streaming.
"My family. I lost my family."

Igor smiled patiently, like a teacher explaining basic addition to a stubborn child.

“Cheer up, you old bugger. Come on. Give us a grin.”

Brown’s face twisted into pure existential despair. He fell to his knees, hands covering his face, weeping loud enough to make the demijohn vibrate.

Ethan watched him, exhaled, and shrugged.

“Some of us have got to live as well, you know.”

Igor nodded approvingly.
The grappa nodded metaphorically.

Brown cried harder.

ETHAN'S FOURTH

RECEPTIONIST: Yes, sir.

MR BROWN: I'd like to die, please.

RECEPTIONIST: Certainly, sir. Have you been here before?

MR BROWN: No, this is my first time.

RECEPTIONIST: Reason for terminating life?

MR BROWN: My family has been massacred. With rolling pins… by old ladies… but anyway, I'd like to join them.

RECEPTIONIST: I see. Let me check… hmm… Mr. Dubakey is free, but he's a little *mourny*. Yes, try Mr. Barnard, room twelve.

Brown trudges down a sterile corridor that smells faintly of bleach and misplaced hope. He reaches a door.

Plaque:

12

Termination of Life

Mr. Barnard, Esq.

Brown opens the door.

MR BROWN: Is this the right room for death?

MR. BARNARD: I've told you once.

MR BROWN: No you haven't.

MR. BARNARD: [Deliberate] Yes I have.

MR BROWN: *When?*

MR. BARNARD: Just now.

MR BROWN: No you didn't.

MR. BARNARD: Yes I did.

MR BROWN: Didn't.

MR. BARNARD: I did!

MR BROWN: Didn't!

MR. BARNARD: I'm telling you I did.

MR BROWN: You did not!

MR. BARNARD: Oh, sorry—was this a five-minute argument or the full half-hour?

MR BROWN: Argument? I came here to die.

MR. BARNARD: You did not.

MR BROWN: Yes I did.

MR. BARNARD: You did not.

MR BROWN: Yes I did.

MR. BARNARD: Didn't.

MR BROWN: Yes I did.

MR. BARNARD: *[Annoyed.]* Didn't!

MR BROWN: Yes I did…. Look, this is an argument, not death.

MR. BARNARD: Yes it is.

MR BROWN: No it isn't. It's actually just contradiction.

MR. BARNARD: No it isn't.

MR BROWN: Yes it is.

MR. BARNARD: It is not!

MR BROWN: It *is*! You just contradicted me!

MR. BARNARD: No I didn't!

MR BROWN: Oh you *did*!

MR. BARNARD: No no no no no no no—

MR BROWN: You did! Just then!

MR. BARNARD: No, no. Non– nonsense.

MR BROWN: Oh look, this is futile.

MR. BARNARD: No it isn't.

MR BROWN: I came here to terminate my life.

MR. BARNARD: No you didn't. You came here for an argument.

MR BROWN: This is not even an argument, it is merely contradiction.

MR. BARNARD: No it isn't.

MR BROWN: Yes it is.

MR. BARNARD: Not at all.

MR BROWN: Now look—

MR. BARNARD: *[Dinging a bell]* Thank you! Morning!

MR BROWN: What?

MR. BARNARD: *[Cheerful]* That's it. Minutes are over. Morning!

MR BROWN: I don't care about your minutes, I want to die!

MR. BARNARD: Sorry. The five minutes is up.

MR BROWN: That was never five minutes just now. And anyway, I don't care. I want to end my biological processes. Now!

Ethan steps in like a man entering a thrift store looking for trouble.

ETHAN: See? Told ya it wasn't so easy.

MR. BARNARD: Yes it is.

MR BROWN: I just wanted to be nowhere with my family instead of here without them.

MR. BARNARD: No you didn't.

ETHAN: Oh, *enough* already.

And then—because bureaucratic eternity demands escalation—Igor oozes into existence behind

Barnard, holding a Peugeot 208 jack like a medieval relic stolen from a very confused mechanic.

CRACK.

Not a dainty crack. Not an apologetic crack.
A Trotsky-special, skull accepting metal the way spreadsheets accept misery: deeply, efficiently, and with textbook penetration.

Barnard freezes mid-contradiction, eyes doing the goldfish farewell tour, then slumps forward like a government form finally approved.

Igor wipes the jack on Barnard's blazer with the solemn professionalism of someone cleaning a very fancy spatula.

IGOR: Sir, should I book him for "completed procedure," or "customer satisfaction guaranteed"?

Ethan shrugs. Brown blinks.
The receptionist—somewhere down the hall—
stamps a form without looking up.

And the universe continues, slightly more concussed than before.

Brown: "Where's Igor?"

Igor: *POOF.*

A bar counter materialized.

Igor materialized the way only Igor could:
by detonating vertically from behind the counter
like a Soviet toaster under emotional distress.

He landed in full barman regalia — crisp vest, immaculate shirt, and the trademark towel over his shoulder: "Have I been summoned? What can I get you, sir?"

Brown flinched so hard his soul left his body and re-entered reluctantly.

Brown: “Oooh··· eeeh··· well, surprise me.”

Igor leaned in with the theatrical gravitas of a Shakespearean butler about to deliver news of a duel.

Igor: “Nancy Reagan liked anal.”

Brown: “Whaaaat?”

Igor: “See — you’re surprised.”

Brown’s brain made dial-up noises.

Brown: “···”

Igor: “A cocktail, perhaps?”

Brown: “Indeed.”

Without even bending, Igor produced a fully made cocktail from under the counter like a magician with questionable ethics.

Brown: “How did you—?”

Igor lifted one eyebrow, the canonical *classy barman explanation look*.

Igor: "Two parts Hennessy, one part Kool-Aid, splash of grape soda, on the rocks of frozen watermelon cubes."

Brown inspected the drink, the way one inspects a bomb with unclear wiring.

Brown: "This is racist at a level so beyond reason that I tend to like it."

Igor nodded as if congratulated on a tax return he forged flawlessly.

Then — *flick!* — with an elegant gesture he produced a tiny plate of snacks.

Igor: "A side of cornbread chips, perhaps?"

Brown gasped. "This is getting so good to be true."

Igor — never one to leave a joke without committing arson to it — slid a tray of raw cotton balls across the counter.

Igor: "Here, Brown, pick some cotton."

Brown, by now delirious with shock and alcohol, picked up a handful. Something ancient and bluesy ignited in him like a rusty engine rolling back to life.

And he started singing, voice trembling, soul cracking open like cheap plaster:

Brown (singing):
"*Dat nigga from Shiloh*
Kin pick a bale o' cotton,
Dat nigga from Shiloh
Kin pick a bale a day…"

The saloon went quiet.

Even the piano froze, one note hanging in the air like it was too stunned to fall.

Ethan, of course, didn't blink — just leaned on the counter, Old Fashioned in hand, as if this were simply episode twelve of whatever cosmic sitcom he lived inside.

And Igor wiped the counter with his towel, proud as a man who had just summoned the exact chaos he intended.

ETHAN'S FIFTH

The saloon was the kind of place where wood went to die.
San Francisco, or whatever godforsaken imitation of it existed after 11 p.m., baked in whisky fumes and bad decisions. The piano in the corner looked like it had PTSD. The bartender had definitely stopped caring around 1986.

Ethan, meanwhile, was conducting a private demolition derby with a row of Old Fashioneds.

He wasn't drinking them.
He was *evicting* them from existence.

Mr Brown, four seats away — because Ethan at close range was medically inadvisable — was holding his own glass as if it were Sura 112, whispering internal pleas for metaphysical refunds. The poor bastard looked like sorrow had decided to sublet him.

Ethan noticed. Ethan always noticed, like a hungry hawk in human disguise.

Ethan: "So you are in pain."

Brown: "Oh god…"

Ethan: "You're grieving."

Brown: "My family… my family…"

Ethan: "You're unset, turned inside out, gutted and folded, nowhere to see wellness or peace, out of breath, no taste, no energy, no meaning."

Brown made a soft, strangled noise — one of those religious exhalations reserved for childbirth and extreme customer service.

Brown: "Christ… Holy Virgin Mary help me… I can't take it anymore."

Ethan: "Okay. Now imagine feeling like that without any reason at all. Just random. No grief, no tragedy, no loss. One wakes up and feels like that."

Brown's head jerked up.
A man glimpsing a new species in his own kitchen.

Brown: "…Oh."

Ethan nodded with the tragic gravitas of a man who won three Nobel Prizes in Suffering but never bothered to pick them up.

Ethan: "Indeed. And it is all the time a surprise, coming up and down, stronger or weaker — like it's got its own timetable and doesn't tell you. Very rude, honestly."

Brown blinked slowly, the gears turning for the first time since his emotional collapse.

Brown: "I can relate to that."

Ethan: "Right. And also — you feel guilty about it. Guilty for feeling like that."

Brown: "Oh, I respect that."

There it was.
The sacred union of two idiots discovering existential kinship over overpriced bourbon.

Brown lifted the glass with the solemnity of a condemned man and dropped the entire Old Fashioned down the hatch. Hand shot up, signaling the bartender for another, like a flag raised at a tragic Olympics.

Ethan grinned at him sideways — the grin that said *welcome to the abyss, we have snacks*.

Ethan: "Attaboy."

Brown, now two drinks deeper and one emotional breakdown lighter, stared at his glass as if waiting for it to wink back.

Brown: “So you’re a mess from before, eh?”

Ethan didn’t even look up. He just gave a tiny nod, the kind that somehow carried the entire history of human despair and at least three failed marriages.

Ethan: “Since soon after the invention of the wheel.”

Brown squinted. “Like··· the literal wheel?”

Ethan: “Oh yeah. They rolled that thing out and I immediately thought, *‘Great. Now we can run away from our problems faster.’* And that was that.”

Brown blinked, let that existential archaeology settle, then took another mouthful of his newly arrived Old Fashioned.

A soft sigh left him — weirdly serene, like a monk who’d decided to renounce earthly attachments by accident.

Brown: “I feel now… a bit… it’s irrational but… a little better.”

Ethan: “Eh…”

Brown: “Well… not better, but… towards content.”

Ethan tilted his head in that very Ethan way — the kind that said: *I refuse to say something encouraging but I acknowledge your attempt at not collapsing.*

Ethan: “Hmm-mm.”

Brown frowned, genuinely puzzled.

Brown: “What is this?”

Ethan swirled his drink, as if conjuring a tiny storm of citrus-scented philosophy.

Ethan: “It’s the doom that every happy man is happy in his own way, but miserable men are miserable all alike.”

Brown blinked. Frowned.
Pointed his finger vaguely upwards, like a man trying to catch a memory before it ran off.

Brown: "I've already heard that."

Ethan nodded, deadpan.

Ethan: "Yeah, it's the reverse-Tolstoy theorem. The principle of the Multiple Miserable Kareninas."

Brown stared at him.

Then, slow as a sunrise, the corner of his mouth twitched.

A laugh almost escaped — a desperate, exhausted, "screw it" sort of laugh — but he swallowed it back into the whiskey, where it belonged.

The piano in the corner produced a single accidental note, as if agreeing.

And the night went on, the saloon breathing around them like an old animal resigned to hosting yet another human catastrophe.

ETHAN'S SIXTH

Ethan and Brown leaned against the counter like two drunks auditioning for the role of "Structural Failure." Igor polished an invisible glass with the commitment of a monk polishing divine relics, except holier and with less paperwork.

Brown, already in advanced slurry mode, dropped his head sideways like a parrot trying to remember the alphabet.

Brown: "Two blacks ride in the backseat of a car. Who's driving?"

Ethan: "Dunno."

Brown: "The cop."

Ethan: "Good. Very good."
He nodded with the serene approval of a man who had finally found something in the universe that made sense.

Igor slid in, smooth as a tax audit.

Igor: "Olive or onion?"

Brown: "What?"

Ethan: "In your martini."

Brown: "Dunno. Never had a martini in my life."

Ethan: "Go for the onion. Gibson-start."

Brown: "I don't know what that means, but ok. What's the difference between a black and a wheel?"

Ethan: "Dunno."

Brown: "When you put the chains on a wheel it doesn't start singing the blues."

Ethan inhaled sharply.

Ethan: "Oooooh! Really good. Really good indeed."

Igor set down the martinis with that grand ceremonial precision usually reserved for coronations and public executions. Brown's glass

had its lonely pickled onion skewered like a gladiator. Ethan's: stark and ungarnished, the drink equivalent of a tax form.

Brown: "And you? No onion nor olive?"

Ethan: "I think the garnish takes the volume that could be occupied by the martini."

Brown: "Oh. Good thinking. Let me try mine."

He sipped.

He tied.

He retched.

He coughed.

He briefly saw the face of a god he didn't believe in and wished he didn't.

Brown: "Dear *god*, you can fuel a car with this."

Ethan: "It's an acquired taste."

Brown (coughing again): “I feel I should take in four strokes now. And I suddenly understand the Carnot cycle.”

Then he leaned in, conspiratorial, eyes shining with that particular light that only appears when six neurons form an alliance.

Brown: “Anyway… what are the five things the black has?”

Ethan and Igor froze like two deer caught in the headlights of a racist quiz.

They looked at each other. Thought. Thought harder. Somewhere, faintly, a kettle boiled.

Igor: “White of eyes.”

Brown raised one finger.

Ethan: “Teeth.”

Second finger.

Igor: "Palms of hands. Oh— and of feet."

Two more fingers. Four total. Brown's face displayed the smug satisfaction of a man who had *trained* for this moment.

Ethan and Igor, meanwhile, were experiencing emotional whiplash. Their brains hit every possible synonym for "confused" all at once: flustered, thrown off, wrong-footed, baffled, bewildered, puzzled, stunned, taken aback, nonplussed, unsettled, disoriented, fazed, rattled, blindsided, thrown for a loop, out of their depth, at a loss, wrong-sided, shaken, knocked sideways—

They briefly consulted the thesaurus under the table, high-fived, and continued being psychologically concussed.

Brown: "And the owner."

He lifted a triumphant fifth finger.

Silence.

Then—

Ethan and Igor rose to their feet like two priests witnessing a miracle they absolutely should not endorse.

They applauded.
They applauded with the gravity of men clapping at the moon landing.
Roses rained from an audience that did not exist.
Spotlights materialized out of sheer narrative will.
A single trumpet played a confused fanfare.

Narrator (with a cigarette): "And thus, Brown earned his place in the annals of the bar's unofficial Vatican of Awful Jokes. Amen— or whatever."

ETHAN'S SEVENTH

And on the seventh day, unlike the little ghost in the sky that doesn't exist and definitely doesn't manage HR for the universe, Ethan did **not** rest.

He woke up with the moral energy of an uncharged phone, watched some porn with the same enthusiasm one reserves for tax tutorials, masturbated out of inertia, ejaculated like a bored sprinkler, didn't clean because "future-me can handle that," and staggered to the kitchen for a Laphroaig that tasted like a burning hospital bed in a peat bog.

He drank himself into a sleep shaped like a crime scene outline.

Woke up.

Had a panic attack so sudden it might as well have worn sirens.

Drank more to bully it back into whatever dark cupboard panic attacks crawl out of.

Watched more porn without coaxing even the suggestion of an erection — like a man browsing museum catalogues of statues he'll never touch.

Then, entirely out of spite toward his own brain, finished the day reading *Don Quijote,* muttering "same, bro" every time the knight made a bad decision.

Igor went to the beach to puncture children's inflatable balls with a sharpened metal straw, leaving behind a trail of disappointed toddlers and confused parents who suspected "European behavior."

Brown gently wept in the bar's storage room, hugging a crate of onions not because they made him cry, but because at least the onions had an excuse.

And thus the seventh day passed, immaculate, sanctified, and absolutely unfit for liturgical calendars.

ETHAN DOES THINGS

ETHAN WAS LOOKING OUT OF THE WINDOW

Ethan was looking out of the window, old fashioned in hand, forehead against the glass.
He looked like a saint on his lunch break — holiness optional, hangover included.

Outside, Sunday in mid-Lent turned into a State-sponsored parade of holy fumes, from the johns with ever-changing tastes to the sly crowd of *what's done is done*. The city marched like a funeral that misplaced the corpse. Every night it echoed like dry knuckles rapping on a coffin lid — *Amen, Mea Culpa, Miserere* — yet not even a mangy mutt rose from the grave. Resurrection strictly by appointment, forms in triplicate.

Tiger-mounted knights strutted by the hour, buglers with no shame, starching up a fresh sense of virtue and polishing brand-new pouts of disdain. One

could practically hear salvation being notarized. Thus Sunday after Sunday the season sank into real gloom — that long Lenten month where the hyena chuckled and the she-wolf howled, because if anyone was having fun, it certainly wasn't the faithful.

Shooting stars and other cheap miracles made conversions easy; the White Mill turned gray again, lambs bleated where lions once roared, and the devout lined up for absolution like bargain hunters on Black Friday. Only a stubborn few blew their top and muttered it was the same old hustle — celestial recycling. Take the guilt, shake the pockets, return next week. No refunds.

Then silence.
Reason took the trophy, heavens cooled, sea lay flat like a long-suffering wife pretending not to hear. Only a handful, slow as dawn, rose again — no

trumpets, no fanfare — and quietly, softly, remembered how to think. Shy miracles, subtle as good whiskey.

Ethan blinked. Thought: *Well, damn — thinking survivors. Endangered species.*
He felt a little tenderness, which annoyed him. He invited the thought in anyway, like a stray cat.
Thought, he mused, *would be nice to welcome into thinking whoever thinking had remembered.*
Clumsy phrasing, but it warmed something.

He took a sip of old fashioned, cherry between teeth, chewed, popped the stone from his mouth, and spat it on the floor with the insolence of a man who believed in nothing except gravity and good liquor.

For a moment — microscopic, fragile — he hoped. A reckless act, considering the world.

Then it started snowing.

Not a timid drizzle of repentant ice — no. Proud flakes, fat as communion wafers and twice as sacrilegious. The world outside the window softened, blurred its edges, forgave itself a little. Ethan did not forgive anyone, least of all himself, but snow made even his rusted heart twitch like an old dog dreaming of rabbits.

Ethan loved few things, but absolutely loved snow *and when it snowed*.
He despised walking — walking was for people with goals or inner peace — but walking in the snow was another species of event. Snow made the world quiet, and if the world was quiet maybe Ethan could hear his own head without needing a drink to shout over it.

So he stood, slow and ceremonial, as if leaving a cathedral built from hangovers. Put on his coat, heavy wool with a smell of old winters. Then his

beloved Stetson — the one that made him look like a gunslinger who took philosophy classes just to heckle the professor.

He stepped outside.

The snow met him like an old friend pretending not to know him too well.
White dust gathered on his shoulders, melting then freezing again, crusting like memory. He imagined the hat whitening, each flake a tiny eraser of bad ideas and worse decisions. He walked — boots sinking with a satisfying crunch — and felt dangerously close to happiness.

A ridiculous feeling. He monitored it the way one checks a suspicious mole.
Happiness. Too bright, too warm. Might spread.

He realized — with mild horror — that the word *love* had been involved. More than once. He could tolerate many sins, but sentimentality was treason.

He stopped in his tracks, inhaled cold sharp air like penance, and frowned at nothing in particular.

There had been too much love mentioned in all that.
Suspicious amounts.
Unstable levels.

He suddenly worried.

Snow kept falling — innocent, persistent — as if the world didn't know what kind of man it was dealing with.

Ethan nursed the absurdity of talking to snow.
Yes, absurd. Stupid. Exactly his flavor.
So he spoke to it anyway, because who was there to judge — the parish? The pigeons? God?

He whispered to the falling flakes:

“Welcome back. Been a foul period since… well, shortly after I was born. You missed all the good disasters.”

The snow landed on his lips like a hush.

Then he heard it — the bell of a church.
Not ringing, but *muffled*, cushioned in white like a corpse wrapped for delivery.
Thank you for muting that, he told the snow. He sincerely meant it.

But then, like a bored librarian of the subconscious flipping through old novels, his mind spat out Levin. Poor Levin, dragged to confession like a criminal, just to marry Kitty — Tolstoy’s great domestic hostage situation. Ethan snorted, and because irony has a leash on him, he started walking toward the church.

He pushed the door open.

Same damn smell as every church on Earth: incense, candle wax, dust, guilt.
A universal franchise. Could have been Rome, could have been Kansas.

He walked to the confessional — the gloryhole of sins, patent pending.
Kneeling was a negotiation with physics and past injuries: knees crack, meniscus protests, back screams, sciatica hisses through nerve like live wire.
But he made it. Bent like a dying saint.

He began to confess. Randomly. More performance art than redemption.

War crimes — hypothetical, but colorful.
Pornhub depravity — search history unprintable.
Petty theft of emotional stability.
Seven deadly sins checked like grocery items.

The priest on the other side hm-hmm'd.
Soft at first. Encouraging. Then less.

Ethan escalated. Because of course he did.

The hm-hmm hardened, grew tremor, rhythm — horrified semaphore.
By the time Ethan reached the optional bonus round involving a nun, a watermelon, and three witnesses who died of embarrassment, the hm-hmm sounded like a diesel engine stalling on a cold morning.

And Ethan thought, without stopping:

This might be the most honest conversation I've had all year.

As Ethan intoned the classics —
that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,
through my fault,
through my fault,
through my most grievous fault —
he was already busy redecorating the holy voicemail

booth with Zippo lighter fluid. A generous coating. The kind that says *redeem this, Padre.*

The priest cleared his throat like a man who suddenly smelled plot.

Ethan, ever the gentleman vandal, accepted his penance: a good handful of Hail Marys, a bucket of Our Fathers, and — because he's classy — left a tip in the form of a couple Hallelujahs. Non-refundable.

Then he rose slightly, spine cracking like old pews, raised his voice like a Shakespearean understudy on his last night:

"O My God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee,
and I detest all my sins,
because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell —
BUT MOST OF ALL — because they offend Thee,

my God,

Who art all good and deserving of all my love—"

He thumbed his lighter.

Fire kissed the wood with a soft *foomf*.

Holy Tinder.

Redemption by barbecue.

The flames climbed politely at first, then with enthusiasm — centuries of varnish proving extremely flammable, as if the Church expected exactly this but chose faith over fire codes.

"…to pray for me to the Lord our God," he finished, flicking the lighter closed with finality and a hint of jazz.

He stepped out of the confessional.

Behind him, curtains ignited.

The priest shrieked in Latin, the universal language of *oh shit*.

Snow welcomed Ethan outside again, gentle, calm, utterly unimpressed by arson.

He stood on the church steps, watched ash meet snow like grace meeting consequence, and let the flakes settle on his coat as if nothing unusual had happened.

He inhaled cold air, exhaled smoke and something like relief.

Close enough to purity for one Sunday.

Ah, burning churches.
Lovable as snow — same softness, same quiet, same instinct to watch them fall and melt.
Ethan spoke to the church — or rather to the *idea* of the burning church, because only the confessional's wooden cheeks were smoldering like a sinner's blush. Still, ideas burn better than oak.

He looked at the bell tower like a man reciting poetry to an executioner, and said to the imaginary blaze consuming sanctimony:

I wish the Vatican would go up in flames,
and the Pope would slowly roast inside its frames,
priests ablaze — no mercy, spare no names.
And when I die, no cleric near my bed,
no Hail Marys, no Our Fathers read,
but a red flag over me — proudly spread.

If Giordano Bruno hadn't kissed the stake,
no papacy today — no holy fake,
and socialism would've won for goodness' sake.

Long live the socialists,
long live Giordano Bruno,
Down with priests and all who bow and kneel,
Long live Bruno, Garibaldi — Campanella with steel!

His breath steamed into the cold night like dragon smoke, and for a moment he felt like Dante flipping the script — paradise optional, inferno BYOB.

Snow fell harder.
Chilled his cheeks, cooled the rant, tucked it into the night like a secret that couldn't help grinning.

Ethan stood there, hat white, shoulders white, world white —
a man alone with snow, arson, and poetry,
dangerously close to feeling something.

But he didn't move.
He just let it fall.

Ethan started to feel the cold tugging his face like an old debt collector.
He pulled the Stetson down lower — brim nearly to the nose — and walked on. The snow underfoot gave that perfect *crunch*, the sound of winter approving your stupidity. The flakes grew fatter,

wetter. Soon sleet arrived like unsolicited advice — tiny ice-needles stinging his cheeks. His coat, once black, now sported a pure white shoulder to cuff gradient. Heavenly couture.

The old road curved around the manor's wall — ivy-fossilized stone, aristocracy long dead but still pretending to stand tall. Beyond it a field lay surrendered to winter, sloping toward the woods like a white bedsheet pulled over a body. A single streetlamp stood there, lonely as a confession unspoken, its light haloing each snowflake like a cheap miracle. Everything was silent. Even the stream below had quit — frozen or just tired.

He followed the curve, boots sinking deeper with every step. He reached the yard.
His home looked like a place that never apologized.

He pulled off gloves, found keys after the ritual pocket excavation, unlocked the door, and slipped

inside — quick, because warmth is always a negotiation.

The hallway greeted him with that classic scent: *warmish, damp, faintly moldy — eau de lived-in negligence.* A house with opinions.

He sat, unbooted — one foot, then the other, a grunt for each.
Coat came off, heavy and wet, hung onto the rack like a defeated soldier.
The Stetson followed, placed as if its brim were still snow-kissed and holy.

Ethan opened the living room door. The fireplace was down to embers — dull red, half as alive as a dying thought — but still enough to paint shadows in the room like exhausted ghosts. He crossed through, quiet steps on worn floorboards, and opened the white door beneath the staircase.

Warmth hit him like good news.

The kitchen breathed orange and smoke.
The wood stove was going strong, and someone — past Ethan, future Ethan, who knows — had laid orange peels on the hot cast-iron plate so they roasted gently. The scent was citrus-tinged nostalgia: childhood without the sentimentality, winter without the misery. Ying and yang of domestic survival.

He dropped his tobacco packet onto the table, sat, rolled a cigarette with stiff fingers — the cold still clinging to him, reluctant to leave. The paper stuck a little at first; his thumb warmed it into obedience. Satisfied, he stood again. Took a match from the box on the marble shelf above the stove. Pressed the red tip against the cast iron — *pshhht* — a violent flare, almost celebratory.

He lit his cigarette. Drew once — deep, grateful. Shook the flame out with that flick you only master after many regrettable years.

Then he reached for the iron rod with the hooked end, lifted the central stove disc — rings clinking softly — dropped the match into the fire below, and set it back. Ritual complete. No gods required.

He sat.
Then stood.
(Ethan's relationship with chairs is fundamentally noncommittal.)

He slipped into the heavy wool slippers by the French door, opened it, stepped out to the terrace, and shut it behind him. Outside, the world was still white — but the terrace, sheltered by the overhang, revealed a patch of green. A small rebellion of grass.

He bent over the sandstone railing, searched the blades until he found a leaf wide enough to matter.

With careful fingers — childhood remembered in muscle memory — he pinched the edges, held them steady, and peeled off the thin sheet of ice that encased it.

He held it up.
A perfect ghost of the leaf. Every vein intact, shape frozen mid-breath. Delicate as truth.

He took it inside.
Slippers left by the window like loyal guards.

He approached the stove again and placed the ice cast gently atop the hot plate.
It hissed — sharp, immediate — then collapsed into a bead of water, perfect sphere, velvet-soft shine. It rolled, tiny miracle, across cast iron.

He watched.
Because every time, it felt like seeing something for the first time.

ETHAN ENTERED A CONFESSIONAL, AGAIN

Ethan entered a confessional, again, and under a symphony of protest from joints and spine alike, again, he kneeled.
Curtain of red velvet — dusty like guilt, perfumed like old incense and older secrets — slid behind him.

Ethan: *"Forgive me father, for I have seen."*

From the other side, a throat cleared like a diesel engine trying its best.

Priest: *"You have sinned, my son?"*

Ethan coughed politely, academically, like a man about to ruin someone's month.

Ethan: *"Oh no, padre, I have seen. As in the past tense of see. Behold, glimpse, notice, observe, regard, witness, discern, perceive, view, scan, spot,*

detect, watch, survey, eye, recognize, identify, distinguish, comprehend visually."

There was a silence thick enough to spread on toast. The priest blinked — you could *hear* it.

Priest: *"Oh?"*

Ethan nodded even though nobody could see him but God, and frankly God wasn't paying attention — distracted, probably, building another mosquito species or something.

Ethan: *"Yes padre, I have seen. I have seen you and little Timmy, in the sacristy. When he asked if it couldn't be ten lord prayers and ten holy marys instead."*

Ethan: *"Yes, I have seen that, padre. And also my phone did. In full HD. So here it is, padre. Your community will see this. Your co-padres, your deacon, your other altar boys (oh* ***especially*** *other*

altar boys, as a warning), your bishop… up to the pope will see it. And your sister. And his kids, the little ones. And your mama, old dear wrinkled mama…"

He let the words hang like a chandelier made of dynamite.

Theatrical pause.
You could hear the priest sweating. Drip. Drip. Holy water going secular.

Ethan's knee cracked like a bad marriage, and he rose about five centimeters — enough for tragedy to feel invited but not enough to make a saint proud.

Ethan: *"So, I'm leaving a pistol on this side of the gloryhole… ehm, confessional. On the very wood I'm kneeling, if joints assist me in standing up. One bullet only. You do your math."*

He placed the pistol down, gentle as a Communion wafer, metal kissing oak.
A mechanical **click** — safety off — because drama requires punctuation.
Two men breathing, one for redemption, one for style.

And the confessional suddenly became the smallest room in the universe.

Outside the confessional, Mr Brown was leaning against the holy water font like a man auditioning for “Least Appropriate Place to Look Cool Vol. 4.” He had a toothpick. No idea where he got it. Maybe Jesus gave it to him.

They stepped into the cold church courtyard, sunlight stabbing through stained glass like God trying to commit chromatic assault.

Mr Brown: *"Who is little Timmy, boss?"*

Ethan lit a cigarette with the grace of a man who had absolutely not just blackmailed a servant of the Lord into··· alternative accounting.

Ethan: *"Fuck me sideways if I know. But **HE** knows."*
He pointed with his chin, mafioso-style, back toward the confessional.

From inside the church came a sound.
Not a gunshot — oh no — that would be too *expected*.
What echoed through the nave was a **B O O M** like San Gennaro and the 4th of July had a love child in a powder magazine.

A firework, a *big* one — choir-melting, saint-statue-shaking, Virgin-Mary-jump-scare strong.
Then incense clouds rolled out the main door like the Holy Spirit vaping aggressively.

Mr Brown blinked.

Mr Brown: *"Was that… festive?"*

Ethan: took a drag long enough to age whiskey.
"On the bright side, Brown, he's probably with Jesus now."

Mr Brown: *"Alive?"*

Ethan: *"Brown. It's Jesus. Nobody's ever alive when he's done with you."*

They kept walking.
Church bells rang behind them — jubilant, inappropriate, like a wedding between guilt and plausible deniability.

Mr Brown shoved his hands in his pockets.
Birds scattered. Clouds parted.
Somewhere, an organ tried to play *Hallelujah* but tripped on itself halfway like it realized the context.

Ethan flicked the cigarette butt onto the church steps with the grace of a man who believed firmly in recycling his sins back to God.

Ethan: *"So, anyway, Brown, what're you doing here?"*

Mr Brown perked up like a labrador hearing the word *treat*.

Mr Brown: *"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you, boss. There's trouble at the mill."*

Ethan sighed. Of course there was. Mills and trouble were like priests and confessions — always suspiciously adjacent.

Ethan: *"What kind of trouble?"*

Mr Brown: *"One of the cross beams has gone out askew on the treadle."*

Ethan froze mid-step. Blinked twice.
It was either profound industrial tragedy or Mr

Brown had learned a new phrase and wanted to show it off.

Ethan (thumb casually tossed back toward the church): *"Well, the Spanish Inquisition must be already in there, or soon to come."*

As if on cue, from inside the church someone screamed *"NO ONE EXPECTS—"* followed by a thud and what might have been a cardinal falling over a pew.

Brown, unbothered, sniffed the air like a seasoned philosopher or a hungry raccoon.

Mr Brown: *"Shall we fire up the barbecue and grill some meat, boss?"*

Ethan locked arms with him, courtly and indecent, two degenerates strolling into the afternoon like kings of a kingdom made of bad decisions.

Ethan: *"I thought you'd never ask."*

Behind them smoke rose — incense or gunpowder, who could tell.
Ahead, the promise of charred flesh, cheap beer, and zero moral clarity.

A perfect day.

They walked on, sun in their eyes, church at their backs, two men bonded by sin, sarcasm, and the distant smell of chorizo unrealized.

Mr Brown: *"Wife coming, boss?"*

Ethan scratched his head like it owed him money.

Ethan: *"I couldn't tell. I tried to call her. She texted me she was spinning."*

Brown's eyebrows rose — slowly, like dough proofing.

Brown: *"Oh dear, is she unwell?"*

Ethan: *"I don't know. I called again, she didn't answer either. She texted something about a bicycle."*

Brown squinted, trying to summon logic like it was a stray cat.

Brown: *"Can she ride a bike?"*

Ethan: *"Not if her life depended on it."*

Brown stopped walking, puzzled enough to be a painting.

Brown: *"So what…?"*

Ethan waved a hand.

Ethan: *"Don't ask. I'm lost with you."*

Brown resumed, hands deep in pockets, chewing invisible philosophy.

Brown: *"Things good in paradise?"*

Ethan snorted.

Ethan: *"She still doesn't want me to kiss the dog on the mouth."*

Brown grimaced like sacramental wine went sour.

Brown: *"I sort of see her point."*

Ethan: *"She says he eats his own vomit. Well, it's just the way back. Out it went anyway. And we vomit too, so…"*

Brown held up a cautionary finger.

Brown: *"They eat their own poop too."*

Ethan: *"This morning he ate the cat's poo too."*

Brown looked at him as if Ethan had personally cancelled Christmas.

Brown: *"You're not defending much your case, boss."*

Ethan: *"Shut up. He's my best friend."*

Mr Brown slowed down, chin pulling toward his chest, eyes drooping like a sad beagle with taxes due.

Ethan noticed.

Ethan: *"Oh stop it. You're my best acquaintance."*

Brown's face lit back up like a discount LED bulb.

They turned the corner.
Somewhere in the distance a dog barked — proud, dumb, supreme lord of bad decisions.

The barbecue was waiting.

A few hours later the world had calmed down — or at least pretended to — while the grill roared like an ancient god who demanded sacrifice in beef form. Burger patties, thick as theological debate, 1"¼ of promise each, seared to that perfect crust: dark, crispy, sinful.

Inside? Still bleeding like Christ after a long weekend.

Ethan pressed a patty with his thumb— gentle, diagnostic — watching juice glisten like diamonds for carnivores.

Ethan: *"I really don't get that smashburger thing, murdering meat into burnt shoe soles."*

Brown nodded, sipping beer like a wise man or an idiot with conviction.

Mr Brown: *"There's been a homosexuality outbreak, I hear."*

Ethan blinked, slow, like a cow discovering mortality.

Ethan: *"Oh, it must be it, then. Faggotness, it matches. Explains also all those medium-well steaks one hears ordering around from other tables."*

Brown leaned conspiratorially.

Mr Brown: *"It's very serious, I hear. They all turn out to be passive in bed."*

Ethan flipped a patty with religious gravity.

Ethan: *"Yes, yes, all the symptoms check. Pass me the beer, will you?"*

Brown grabbed two bottles, handed one over.

Mr Brown: *"While I was buying it, I saw boxes of alcohol-free beer at the liquor store."*

Ethan froze mid-sip, eyes hollow like a man who just heard the word *bran*.

Ethan: *"Do you think we'll have to go back and wear masks?"*

Brown shrugged, turning a sausage with casual elegance.

Mr Brown: *"I really hope not. But I wouldn't mind another lockdown."*

Ethan's face lit like a prophet receiving revelation through pork fat.

Ethan: *"Staying home all day grilling meat and drinking whisky? Count me in, please!"*

They high-fived — a slap loud enough to disturb a pigeon from philosophical contemplation.

Grease hissed. Sun dipped low.
It was almost peaceful.

Almost.

The Uber slowed to a stop in front of the house, headlights washing across the lawn like a confessional spotlight nobody asked for.
Door opened.
Ethan's wife stepped out — sweaty, hair like a Renaissance painting after the fire, grinning wide enough to make sunflowers jealous.

Wife: *"You guys grilling meat? Oh wonderful. Don't count me in. We had pizza with the spinning gang."*

Brown blinked. His brain, that brave little hamster, sprinted inside its wheel.

Brown: *"Spinning gan…?"*

Ethan's boot connected with Brown's foot — clean, sharp, disciplinary.
A silent message: *Brown. Do not pull this thread. It leads nowhere safe.*

Ethan: *"Have a nice shower, dear."*

Wife: *"Sure will!"*
She dashed inside, leaving a trail of sweat, perfume, and terrifying happiness.

Brown turned to Ethan, confused like a cow at a crossroad.

Brown: *"Boss, why did you…?"*

Ethan popped open two beers like a man defusing emotion with bottle caps.

Ethan: *"You heard her majesty. 'Oh wonderful' — don't count her in."*

Brown nodded, gears finally engaging.

Brown: *"There will be plenty of leftovers."*

Ethan snorted.

Ethan: *"There will be anyway. Have you ever seen someone at a buffet pick one olive and one grape?"*

Brown stared into the middle distance — and the universe stared back.

Brown: *"Oh."*

Ethan: *"Here, let me open you a beer. You are in need of one."*

He handed Brown the bottle, crisp *psssht* of release like sins forgiven.

Brown: *"Always. Thank you, boss."*

Two beers.
Two men.
One grill.
One suspiciously cheerful wife upstairs.

Thunder rumbled in the sky — distant, moody, like narrative foreshadowing stretching its knuckles.

She drifted back out to the patio like a mermaid who decided legs were worth it after all.
Hair damp, smelling of citrus shampoo and potential chaos.
Margarita glass sweating like guilt in July.

Brown (suddenly aware of absence like a missing limb):
"Boss… where's the dog?"

Before Ethan could invent an answer, she chimed with breezy cheer:

Wife: *"Ride on the puppybus. They go playing out of town in the meadows. He has so much fun."*

Brown blinked. Puppybus? Meadows? Fun?
This was Lot's wife but instead of turning to salt,
she turned to whimsical logistics.

Ethan, leaning back, pointing lazily toward the glass door where sunlight carved the cat into a living statue:
"And look at the window: the cat sleeping in the sun. It is like Noah's Ark.
The dog, the cat, her and me."

Then his voice shifted — not dramatic, but *inevitable* —
as if something ancient cracked open in his chest.

And he **sang** (or something like singing — Ethan was many things, a nightingale wasn't one).
Words rolled out — heavy, surreal, prophetic — like a sailor reading scripture from a drowned hymnbook:

A flight of remote-controlled seagulls
And a beach of dead seashells

In the night a steel star
Confuses the sailor
White streaks across the blue sky
To enchant and make children dream
The moon is full of flags without wind
How exhausting it is to be human

Brown froze with a burger halfway to his mouth.
Wife swayed with the margarita like waves in a glass.
Something crackled — maybe the grill, maybe destiny.

The ship will leave, it will depart
Where it will arrive, no one knows
It will be like Noah's Ark
The dog, the cat, you and me

A hush.
A breeze.
A weight over the table no one acknowledged.

A bull lies stretched on the sand
And its heart is leaking kerosene
At every turn a tin horse
Destroys the rider
Earth and sea, white dust
A city lost itself in the desert
The house is empty, it waits for no one anymore
How exhausting it is to be human

The wife's smile softened — not happy, not sad — *aware*.
Brown swallowed hard, meat suddenly holy in his mouth.

The ship will leave, it will depart
Where it will arrive, no one knows
It will be like Noah's Ark
The dog, the cat, you and me

When it ended, **nobody spoke**.
Grill hissed. Margarita glass clinked. Cat stretched on the windowsill like a lazy god.

Ethan stared at nothing.
Brown stared at Ethan.
Wife stared into her drink as if it might answer for all mankind.

And the world — for a single hanging moment — felt like a vessel about to depart.

ETHAN PUT THE BOOK BACK ON THE SHELF

Ethan put the book back on the shelf, wedging it between two other volumes that he kept apart with thumb and pinky — the kind of gesture that said *you two behave*, as if Nietzsche and a cookbook on risotto needed space for marital issues. He exhaled through his teeth. The spine creaked. He stepped back.

Nikolai Dmitrievich. God, that one. The man had taken three weeks to die and somehow every hour contained the drama of a century — atheism in the morning, repentance by dinner, and an emergency un-repentance at midnight. Like a ping-pong ball between Saints and Reason, served by tremors and morphine. Ethan could almost hear the old man wheezing out philosophical footnotes through a straw.

And the priest — always the priest — drifting in and out like mildew, eager hands ready to stamp a soul for delivery. Ethan remembered the passage, Garibaldi's bitter iron, the declaration sharp enough to slice fingers.

Yes. Since, in the final moments of a human being, the priest — taking advantage of the exhausted state in which the dying person finds himself, and of the confusion that often follows — pushes his way in and, employing every vile stratagem, spreads around, by means of the deceit in which he is a master, the claim that the deceased, repenting of his former beliefs, returned to the duties of a Catholic; therefore I declare that, being fully in possession of my reason today, I do not wish, at any time, to accept the hateful, despicable, and villainous ministry of a priest, whom I consider an atrocious enemy of humankind and of Italy in particular. And that only in a state of madness or of gross ignorance could I believe that anyone might entrust himself to a descendant of Torquemada.

He shut the cabinet with a soft click like a polite insult. The room seemed suddenly too sober. The thought too large. So Ethan walked to the bar — three steps, one sigh — selected a bottle like a man choosing a verdict, dropped sugar into the glass, bitters like tiny funeral bells, orange peel curled like a sneer. Ice. Bourbon. Stir. He watched amber whirl like a galaxy of bad decisions.

He leaned on the counter. And thought of things. Things. Things.

He remembered himself as a kid — skinny knees, too-big sweater, hair like he combed it with static electricity. And behind him floated a handful of small shadows he couldn't quite name anymore — maybe friends, maybe ghosts of possibilities, maybe just other boys who smelled like chalk and dirt.

He hated school. Hated catechism even harder — the way a cat hates being baptized. Playing cowboys and indians was better theology anyway: the bullet

always finds the sinner, redemption comes with a plastic revolver and a good death behind the gym.

First days of school. The word *first* still tasted of uniform sweat and fear, and *school* reeked suspiciously, like incense left too long in a drawer. Religion stuck to everything like cheap glue. Old nuns in black sheathes gliding down corridors, eyes sharp as sewing needles, smiles rarer than snowstorms in hell. They believed — oh, how they believed — and with that belief they carved sin into tender minds like initials on a desk. Not with cruelty, no. With love. Which was worse.

Evenings in the chapel: dim lights, stale songbooks, Jesus nailed up like a warning sign. They spoke of guilt, repentance, and eternal fires; we whispered about cap guns. Our eyes stared straight ahead at the crucifix, but behind them galloped stallions through open plains. Heroes with rifles. Cherokee scouts. Buffalo Bill and the boys, dust on their boots, chewing imaginary tobacco with solemn, cinematic gravity.

Our bodies stayed on the pew.
Our souls were somewhere between the highway overpass and the Wild West — the holy land of scraped knees and stolen matches.

And his best friend — oh yes, *her* he remembered well.
Mischievous partner in crime, tender confidant, guardian angel with muddy knees and a scuffed-up smile. She could lie with the innocence of a saint and the precision of a Swiss watch. They stole chalk, broke windows with impressive statistical frequency, and shared secrets as if they were currency of a small nation.

Now *he* was the hero — unquestionably, arrogantly, gloriously so — and his horse (a crooked bicycle with a seat that creaked like arthritis) spoke only English, naturally, because foreign horses were spies. The cowboy's bride — that was her, though she shared the title with at least three other contenders depending on the recess negotiation market.

Battalions he faced! Whole regiments conjured from dust and imagination. Germans, pirates, the neighbor's mean rooster — all fell to his slingshot of righteous childhood vengeance. One day he even put the slingshot away, solemnly, like a veteran hanging his boots, and rehearsed a rock tune for the school matinées. Off-key, but with passion. Enough passion to make a nun flinch.

Now he was king — absolute monarch of the hallway, paper crown taped to his forehead, armed with a whistle confiscated from gym class. Hall monitor and judge, executioner of tardiness, pardoner of friends. And by his decree — no appeal allowed — *everyone was obliged to be happy.*

No sadness, no penitence, no confessions under flickering chapel lights.
Just marbles clicking like poker chips, the smell of summer crayons, and bruised shins that healed in two days, unlike adulthood which takes longer and leaves stranger scars.

Childhood was a republic of nonsense, and he ruled it like a benevolent tyrant with pockets full of stolen cookies.

And all of a sudden she grew up and he didn't. No warning shot, no messenger pigeon, no royal decree announcing *"effective immediately, childhood is cancelled."* One week they were ambushing Nazis behind the woodpile, next week she was ambushing acne with foundation and lip gloss.

He was still arranging toy soldiers in heroic formations — cavalry here, infantry there, victory inevitable — while she began to notice real soldiers, with jawlines, cologne, and motorbikes. Indiana Jones — their north star, their archaeologist demigod — turned from idol to childish relic overnight. In the time it takes to say *Indiana* (let alone *Jones*), she jumped tracks.

Those movies they rewatched till the VHS wheezed?

Those afternoons reenacting the boulder chase with laundry baskets?
Those lava floors that could only be crossed by sofa cushion stepping-stones?
Gone.

She became a teenager, fast like a train that skipped his stop. Makeup. Fashion. Songs about feelings he hadn't unlocked yet. She sailed into the glittering sea of adolescence; he stayed on shore building catapults from popsicle sticks, hoping she'd come back for just one more adventure. Spoiler: she did not.

Kerouac whispered from some smoky corner:

We turned at a dozen paces, for love is a duel,
and looked at each other for the last time.

Except she didn't turn. She never looked back.
He did — too often — long enough to memorize her silhouette,

then long enough to forget it,
then long enough for it to hurt again.

And so he faced the world alone,
hero with no sidekick,
general with no battalion.

“Give me Blücher or give me night,”
he thought in the most dramatic inner monologue a twelve-year-old can muster.
But neither came.

Only daylight.
Harsh, fluorescent, unromantic daylight.
And him, short sword of childhood still in hand, facing grown-up life like a knight who overslept the crusade.

A tear fell in the old fashioned and Ethan stirred it in, the ice clicking like tiny bones in a glass — a sommelier of nostalgia would call it *notes of regret with a citrus finish*.

Thirty years — a whole lifetime. People say *"feels like yesterday"*, like they're trying to seduce time itself. But Ethan knew better, and so do you. Time took its cut, like a gangster collecting protection money. It left wrinkles, dust, receipts; it gave back aches, wisdom, and the unrequested ability to cry at commercials for dish soap. He was barely young and already felt old, and perhaps she — wherever she'd sailed — had never been young at all, not the way they were.

They had illusions, or thought they did. Bright banners once, now washed grey. Words they swore meant forever got chewed down to stubs by calendar pages and fluorescent office lights.

Who tells the young how many times you can be wrong? Wrong until the word stops meaning anything. Wrong like a hobby. Wrong until starting again feels like parody. And still the world spins, smug bastard — with us or without us. Everything alive grows out of something dead; ideas sprout

from compost; joy is poured over tears like cheap syrup over bitter coffee.

And more than sad, it's almost funny.
All those summers they spent building miracles out of boredom.
All those sacred afternoons turned to dust just because growing up was compulsory and irreversible.
Their myths now museum pieces — chipped, faded, priceless only to them.

Do you remember?

The toy soldiers — glorious plastic dead, stiff in the service of a kingdom of mud. Buried in a hedge with full honors, bugle played by whistling through cupped hands, flag improvised from a candy wrapper.

The black desk in the third row, eternal witness to treasonous laughter, chalk-dusted conspiracies, two

hearts pounding like wild drums under too-big sweaters. That desk knew secrets. It could testify.

How he loved Garibaldi — red-shirted hero, patron saint of stubbornness — while she threw Napoleon in his face, small hat, big ego, world at his feet. They argued history like lovers argue music, each certain their general could beat the other in arm wrestling.

And do you remember —
oh, do you —
how absolute that tenderness was?
A relic of purity so sharp it cuts in memory.
A rope bridge carrying childhood over a chasm we couldn't name yet.
Carrying them gently toward what the world calls adulthood —
that great joke with serious consequences.

And Ethan had one memory — not the golden ones with sunlight and prairies and plastic battalions, not the heroic deaths or the shared laughter — but *that* one. The rotten little tooth the tongue keeps poking.

The hammer that strikes whether he invites it or not.

They were in front of her house gate.
Late afternoon maybe, or early evening — doesn't matter. What matters is the key ring in his hand: a jangling constellation of possibilities, talismans of adulthood they were only beginning to understand. He took it with the confidence of a magician preparing to levitate the dog. He inspected the keyhole like an expert locksmith in a cheap film. Looked at the keys as though reading ancient runes. Chose one at random, theatrically — fate, luck, hubris.

And the damn thing worked.
The key slid in like destiny had a sense of humor, the lock clicked, the gate opened with obedient grace. He expected her face to light up, to grin, maybe clap, maybe say *wow Ethan*, maybe just see him — properly, fully — as the protagonist he was in his own head.

But no.
She just slanted her eyes — thin, annoyed, the universal expression of *oh look, the usual show-off again* — and walked past him into the garden without slowing her pace, without leaving even a scrap of admiration behind.

And he stood there, gate still in his hand, suddenly an idiot.
Too loud, too eager, too desperate to be noticed.
A boy trying to impress a girl who had already boarded the train out of childhood.

He hated himself for it instantly.
That hot, metallic shame — the kind that stains decades.
The feeling that you've misread the room of existence.
That you are forever one gesture too much, one joke too loud, one miracle too pointless.

Of all the memories — the games, the summers, the victories —

it's always that one that returns.
The click of a perfect key chosen blind.
The gate opening like applause that never came.
Her back walking away, indifferent.

That's the one that pounds and pounds.
Not because it was tragic,
but because it was so small,
and he never recovered from it.

Ethan was now letting the tears roll — no attempt to hide them behind manly coughs or philosophical posture. Just letting them drip, salt in whiskey, salt on cheeks. His breath hitched like a bad car starter. Then — because dignity is overrated — he leaned forward and *thunked* his head against the wall. Once. Twice.

Thud.
Thud.
Thud.

Catharsis via drywall.

And, as always, he regretted everything — his life, his choices, that afternoon at the gate, being the kind of person who tries too hard, laughs too loud, hopes too bright. The kind of… of…

Muppet.
Yes. A furry puppet of fate with a floppy self-esteem.

"Mahna mahna," he muttered, because the universe has a sense of humor even when it kicks you in the spleen.

Mahna — **thud**
Mahna — **thud**
Mahna — **thud**
Mahna — **thud**

Like percussion. Like penance.
Like trying to drum shame out through his skull and onto the plaster.

Somewhere in the memory palace, Kermit looked disappointed.
Miss Piggy rolled her eyes.
The whole Muppet band played a funeral dirge in kazoo minor.

And Ethan kept banging his head,
because sometimes grief needs percussion accompaniment.

ETHAN LICKED THE EDGE OF THE ROLLING PAPER

Ethan licked the edge of the rolling paper with the delicate care of a monk illuminating a manuscript, except instead of prayer there was *hashish*, and instead of devotion there was pure, sparkling delinquency.
The thing he was sealing was no mere cigarette — it was a medieval siege weapon made of Rizla. Conical like a wizard's hat. Fat like a county fair pig. Aromatically illegal.

He held it up for light inspection — it sagged like a dying comet. Perfect.

Mr. Brown peered over, eyes curious, soul already half-lost.

Brown: "Whatcha doin' boss?"

Ethan, without breaking focus:

Ethan: "Saco un papelillo me preparo un cigarrillo y una china pal' canuto de hachís."
He licked again. Lit it. Puff. Inhale.
He exhaled like a factory chimney under union strike.

Brown: "I see. Can I join?"

Ethan handed the botanical howitzer over with solemn brotherhood.

Ethan: "Always my friend, always. He who doesn't smoke in company is either a thief or a spy."

Brown inhaled. Eyes widened. Knees buckled. Synapses filed for divorce.

Brown: "Well said, boss."

From the fog of hash and questionable life choices emerged a **Scotland Yard bobby**, full uniform, tall helmet, mustache, the whole Big Ben cosplay.

Copper: "Hey, you can't do that. It's against the law."

Ethan didn't even turn.

Ethan: "Igor."

And from behind **a shrubbery**
(*one that looks nice… and not too expensive*)
popped Igor — as always, just *there*, like a glitch in reality.

In his hands: **The Trotskyaxe™**.
The *actual* one. Bloodstained. Museum-tag still attached.

Igor launched vertically like a caffeinated kangaroo.
On the descent — **CRACK!**

The Trotskyaxe™ split helmet, skull, law, order, and several centuries of British police dignity.
The bobby dropped like a bag of onions someone forgot at checkout.

Silence.

Smoke.
Birdsong.
A faint Westminster chime in the distance.

Ethan flicked ash off the joint.

Ethan: "So, anyway..."

Igor, face Jackson-Pollocked with cranial interior:

Igor: "Can I join?"

Ethan: "Where there's for wo, there's four three, my jolly good friend."

Igor smiled like a child finally allowed near the fireworks.

Brown, passing the joint with grave ceremony, recited like a drunk bard:

Brown:
"Add a seat at the table, there’s one more friend

tonight.
Just move your chair a little, you'll fit in just alright.
That's what friends are made for, to share some company.
Smile at our new guest now, don't let him ever leave.
Split the bread between you, and joy will double too."

He coughed. The bobby's foot twitched. No one cared.

Mr. Brown wiped bobby-goo from his sleeve like a man brushing off dandruff and not felony murder.

Brown: "Anyway, is it pronounced *Eegor* or *Eyegor*?"

Igor, who was currently removing the Trotskyaxe™ from the ex-policeman's cranium like a cork from a wine bottle:

Igor: "Either way. Both are accepted."

Brown: "But they told me it was either *one or the other*."

Igor shrugged, calm as a nun at mass.

Igor: "Well they were wrong then, weren't they?"

Brown blinked.
Existential crisis: postponed due to drugs.

Ethan suddenly leaned back too far—
chair tipped—
gravity remembered it had a job—

FLOP
He landed into a **haystack** behind him that absolutely should not have been indoors, but here we are.

Legs up like an overturned beetle, cigarette-spear still in mouth, he beamed:

Ethan (bad German accent): "Who vould like to have a *roll in ze hay*? It's fun!"

Zero hesitation.
Brown dove after him like a man tackling happiness itself.
Igor, still dripping bureaucratic brain matter, followed with a gymnastic forward flip that would've won bronze at least.

They landed in the hay in a holy tangle of limbs, clothing, and social decline.

And like perfectly synchronized idiots they burst into song, loud enough to wake the Protestant Reformation:

🎶 **"Roll, roll, roll in ze hay!"**
🎶 **"Roll, roll, roll in ze hay!"**
🎶 **"Hay is for horses but we don't care!"**
🎶 **"Roll, roll, roll in ze hay!"**

Ethan rolled left, Brown rolled right, Igor rolled diagonally like a glitching NPC. The hay exploded in golden confetti. The dead bobby lay forgotten like last week's groceries.

The hay settled. The universe exhaled. Ethan, glittered in straw like a discount nativity angel, took a long contemplative drag from the botanical warhead.

His eyes glazed with grand philosophic nonsense. He raised one finger — solemn, stoned, Kant-ish.

Ethan:
"You know what, friends? Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: **the starry heavens above me and the moral weed within me.**"

Silence.
A holy moment.
Somewhere, Kant rolled in his grave but politely.

Mr Brown: "Amen."

Igor: "I crave a prolegomenon."

They all nodded as if that meant anything.

Ethan blinked.
The weed completed boot sequence.

Ethan: "Must be the munchies. Who wants pizza?"

Like toddlers spotting Santa:

Brown & Igor (instantly): "Me! Me!"

Ethan, noble patriarch of degeneracy:

Ethan: "Wife, pizza for all, please."

A door creaked.
There she was: **The Wife™**.
Hair in a messy bun, wearing dignity like armor.
She peered into the hay room, judging all existence.

Wife: "Order your own goddam pizza."

Ethan deployed **Plan A: Weaponized Cuteness**.
He widened his eyes — enormous, tragic, cartoon puppy orphans.

His lashes fluttered like angel wings caught in a mild breeze.

Ethan: "Preetty pleeease."

Brown joined, eyes shimmering like wet Labradors. Igor too — except his blood-crusted puppy eyes made him look like a demon begging for hugs.

They stared.
United front of pathetic charm.

Wife stared back.
A long sigh — the sigh of someone who once had dreams.

Wife: "Oh, damn you all."

She grabbed her phone with martyrdom.

Wife (dialing pizza place): *"Yes, hello. I want four large pizzas. No, don't ask. Just send them. And extra cheese. Yes, I'll pay for moral damages."*

The men, still in hay, whispered like monks around a relic:

All (low, reverent): "Yeeeeah."

Ethan exhaled a cloud that smelled like Woodstock and bad decisions.

Ethan dusted hay from his eyebrow with the dignity of a philosopher in a barn.

Ethan: "Well, nothing to be done till the pizzas arrive."

The words hung like Beckett smoking a joint.

Igor: "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion."

Brown sat up, hay crown on head, blessed idiot king.

Brown: "Does anybody have some Kool-Aid? Also grape soda would do."

Ethan stared at him like God staring at humanity: disappointed but curious how it keeps getting worse.

Ethan: "I have some 2005 Château Lafite, a few bottles left of 2008 Dom Pérignon, and a box of 35-year-old Laphroaig Islay whisky."

He gestured behind the hay to a neat crate of priceless booze, casual as pointing to a toaster.

Brown blinked. Twice. No signs of life inside.

Brown: "Oh no boss, some soda's better. Any Fanta at least?"

Silence.

Somewhere in the distance a bagpipe wept.

Igor froze — pupils dilated, moral compass spinning like a slot machine. His voice turned medieval.

Igor: "The *garrote vil* is widely underrated."

Brown didn't even notice he'd just triggered the Spanish Inquisition.

Ethan coughed into his wrist with aristocratic manners.

Ethan: *(polite cough, approving nod)* "Quite."

BING–BONG.
The doorbell rang like divine judgement wrapped in mozzarella.

Wife, martyr of domestic logistics, marched out.
The boys listened — hay crackling, weed halo hovering like Saint Cannabis of Perpetual Munchies.

Box shuffle. Payment. A brief argument about tip.
Wife returned with **four steaming boxes** like an avenging angel of carbs.

She dropped them on the table.
Then seized one — *her* one — and claimed it like a dragon claiming gold.

Wife: "So, the parma ham, arugula and cherry tomatoes is for me. For you guys—"

She opened the others slowly. Cruelly. Like monologue in a Tarantino scene.

Wife: "You choose from anchovies and pineapple, sausage and pineapple, and extra cheese and pineapple."

She paused.
Glared.
Let silence marinate like revenge.

Wife: "Yes, you all get pineapple on pizzas. So next time you learn to order your goddam pizzas yourselves."

Ethan swallowed.
Brown blinked.
Igor crossed himself in Russian Orthodox out of sheer panic.

Mr Brown's voice quivered like wet newspaper:

Brown: "My family got murdered for much less…"

There was a shift in the shadows.
Corner of the room — movement.
Habit fabric.
Rosaries.

A **S.N.I.F. unit — Special Nonne Intervention Force**
fully tactical, veiled commandos of holiness.
All holding rolling pins like nightsticks.

They nodded in silent agreement at Wife's ruling.
Justice delivered.
Pineapple sentencing approved.

Then — *poof!*
They vanished in a **flour-dust cloud**, faint scent of basil and guilt.

The men stared at the pizzas.
The pizzas stared back.
Pineapple glistened like tropical betrayal.

Ethan sighed the sigh of a philosopher betrayed by fruit.

Ethan rose — or rather **unfolded from the hay like a tragic accordion** — pizza box in hand, staring at the glowing yellow cubes of Hawaiian heresy.

He spoke with the gravitas of a dying emperor:

Ethan:
"My friends,
we are as

in autumn

on pizzas

the pinrapples."

The syllables fell heavy like wet confetti at a funeral. Brown blinked as though he'd been handed a prophecy in IKEA assembly instructions.

Igor, however, understood **immediately and violently**.

He stood, posture rigid with Slavic resolve.

Igor: "Shall I gather the *Carcano Modello 91*, master?"

Mr. Brown blinked again, two brain cells tap-dancing in confusion.

Brown: "What was that, boss?"

Ethan turned to him slowly — head tilted, smoke curling upwards like incense to gods who stopped listening long ago.

He rested a gentle, tragic hand on Brown's shoulder.

Ethan:
"O Brown, my good acquaintance Brown, at times I think

you stand alone on the heart of the earth
pierced by a ray of the sun's light:

and then it is night."

Brown's lip trembled.
He felt **seen**, which was horrible.

Igor, still awaiting divine kill-order with Carcano lust in his eyes, breathed loudly like a bear prepared for papal assassination.

Pineapple glistened.
Hope wilted.
Existence tasted like canned fruit syrup.

And so it came to pass —
tragedy draped in mozzarella, destiny dripping with tropical disgrace.

Eventually, **like swines wallowing in their own filth**, they ate the abominations.
The horror.
The junk.

The **filth**:
pizzas with pineapple.

No glory.
No resistance.
Just three grown men, weed-stoned and hay-dusted,
gnawing cursed slices like raccoons behind a supermarket.

They *had* considered ordering proper pizzas —
sanctified by pepperoni, blessed by mushroom,
untainted by Caribbean fruit.
They even stared at the phone for a full minute.

But laziness whispered,
"later."
The munchies screamed,
"NOW."
The hash said,
"bro just eat the world."

And then there was **Wife** —
looming in memory like a judge with perfect aim

and no patience.
They accepted their punishment as penitence.
Atonement through pineapple.

Of course they deserved it.
They knew it.
They chewed knowing.

Sauce dribbled down Brown's chin like shame.
Igor ate stoically, as if each bite was a confession.
Ethan stared into the molten cheese like Hamlet holding a skull.

A long silence.
Chewing.
Existential dread with crust.

Brown, voice soft:

Brown: "It… it's not that bad, boss."

Ethan looked at him with slow horror.

Ethan: "That's how sin works, Brown. First you tolerate. Then you accept. Then you enjoy…"

Igor finished his slice and licked his fingers like a war criminal.

Igor (serene, terrifying): "Another box?"

The last shred of civilization died right there next to the dead bobby.

ETHAN CLOSED THE BOOK

Ethan closed the book and flicked the cover like one flicks a fly or a priest.
It read *Anna Karenina*.
On the cover? A Picasso *Dora Maar*. Because nothing says “19th-century adultery and locomotives” like a woman with two noses, three tears, and a face rearranged like Italian politics.

Ethan: "What an anguish of a bore. Why did I read it?"
(He tossed it onto the table like a dead pigeon. The cat stared. Judged. Approved.)

Igor appeared from nowhere, as always, smelling faintly of kerosene and apricot jam.
Igor: "Marketing, master?"
He moved like a man who once killed someone for mispronouncing *Bulgakov* and got away with it due to lack of witnesses. Convenient.

Ethan lit a cigarette, missing the lighter three times because life is tragedy but hands are comedy.
Ethan: "Must have been. They might as well sell merchandising. I'd buy *Anna's collection of severed limbs after the train*."
A pause.
Ethan: "Also, a reproduction of the train bogie that cut her. Limited edition. Signed by Tolstoy. Numbered. With blood."

Mr Brown looked up from his beer like a confused golden retriever in a philosophy class.
Mr Brown: "What's that, boss?"

Ethan took a slow drag, exhaled ennui, continued:
Ethan: "It's like *Porgy and Bess*, but Bess jumps into a ferry wheel."

Brown blinked twice, brain buffering.
Mr Brown: "What's that, boss?"

Igor, helpful soul, polished an imaginary glass.
Igor: "It's *Family Matters* but Laura jumps under a bus. Or subway. Or a train. Whatever the poor used to move in 1990s Chicago."

Brown nodded suddenly enlightened like a monk struck by lightning.
Brown: "Oh, I see. Like my family was massacred by Italian grandmothers with rolling pins, but asking for it."

Silence.
The fridge hummed like a Gregorian choir with alcoholism.

Igor: "Precisely, Brown!"
He clapped once. A pigeon fell from the rafters.
Dead of confusion.

Ethan leaned back, eyes narrowing with the delight of a man discovering a new sin.
Ethan: "Igor, do you think we are being racist and

paternalizing enough for this narrative to be labelled as racist?"

Igor, solemn as a pope losing his keys:
Igor: "I think we're on the road, master Ethan."

Ethan raised his glass.
Ethan: "Good. Controversy sells. Tolstoy taught me nothing, but capitalism always pays dividends."

Somewhere, Tolstoy rolled in his grave.
Then rolled again—
because Ethan bought exclusive rights to his corpse just to make him do so.

Ethan tapped ash into an empty saucer shaped like the Virgin Mary—head missing, naturally—and stared at Brown as one stares at a philosophical riddle that smells vaguely of bourbon and resignation.

Ethan: "Brown, why are you here?"

Mr Brown straightened his collar, as if preparing for another round of authorial abuse.

Mr Brown: "Because I'm a nobody African-American character that the authoress uses both as an object of racial stereotypes and a subject of racist jokes. Also, as a punching ball for cruelty—like having my family massacred by Italian nonnas with rolling pins, or having a tray of raw cotton served to me to pick from."

Igor beamed like a communist seeing free bread.
Igor: "Good boy, Brown."

Brown continued with the calm of a man who knows suffering is a genre:

Mr Brown: "Oh, and also this: to be paternalized like a child or a dog. Patted on the head, pitied, dehumanized, and used as comedic ballast."

He sipped beer.

A sigh.

Somewhere outside, a church burned a little brighter—for ambiance.

Ethan scratched his chin.

Ethan: "We must be reaching peak racism here."

Igor raised one philosophical eyebrow—he kept it in a jar for occasions like this.

Igor: "What if he was also a woman?"

Ethan froze. Time paused. A bottle clinked. The universe leaned forward like gossiping aunties.

Ethan (turning his gaze upward, toward the ceiling where the author always hides like God or tax collectors):

"You hear, Pratalia? What do you think? **Mr to Ms Brown?**"

A thunderclap.

The Narration itself coughed politely.

The wallpaper peeled back like a wound.

From the void, a typewriter clacked—keys possessed by the hands of Alba Pratalia, smug as a cat in lingerie:

Pratalia's Voice (booming, sarcastic, licking editorial power like a lollipop):

"Oh, sure Ethan, let's just make Brown a woman. That'll solve racism. Sprinkle gender on a stereotype like powdered sugar on a corpse. Very progressive."

The voice paused, reflective.

Deadpan.

Pratalia:

"Though, admittedly…

Ms Brown does sound funnier."

Brown shivered.

Half fear, half promise of plot arc.

Igor whispered like a pervert in church:
"Ms Brown, please bring me the cotton tray—same cruelty, fresh pronouns."

Brown sighed with centuries of burden.
Mr? Ms? Who cares.
Suffering is universal.

Brown: "At least give me a last name before the transition."

Ethan: "Fair. Can't feminize a man without an identity to ruin."

And so the paperwork for gender-reassignment was fetched.
From the bar drawer.
Between a revolver and a coupon for wings.

Spanish moss slithered down from the ceiling like guilt with foliage.
The bar dimmed.

Someone put on a blues record automatically—never a good sign.

Igor, realizing he'd tossed himself into a minefield with the grace of a drunk flamingo, tried to recover:

Igor (voice cracking like communist economy): "Brown is the last name. As was the name of your forefather being freed from the plant..."

Brown leaned forward, eyes like two loaded revolvers.

Brown: "Plant what? Have the courage to finish the phrase."

Silence.

Igor: ...
Ethan: ...

The universe itself held its breath like a priest caught in a brothel.

Then—

Pratalia, omnipotent and hungover deity of questionable taste, boomed from the void:

Pratalia:
"**Plantation, Brown.**
Because your forefathers were slaves.
In a plantation.
Because they were nigg— blacks.
Like you."

The soundtrack needle *SCRATCHED*.
Brown's eye twitched like a detonator waiting for purpose.
Spanish moss crept over chairs, bottles, Ethan's boots—nature trying to politely cover the scene like a corpse in a crime drama.

Ethan took a trembling sip of whiskey.
Not from fear—Ethan doesn't fear.
From **anticipation**.

Ethan: "Well that escalated like an elevator with broken brakes."

Igor nodded solemnly, as though he had personally invented guilt.

Igor: "Master Ethan, I believe we have gone from 'questionably racist' to 'PhD thesis material.'"

Brown stood up. Slowly.
Like civil rights movement condensed into one man.
He brushed moss from his shoulder with dignity so heavy the bar stools sobbed.

Brown:
"So I'm a black man named Brown
descendant of slaves,
inserted in this story
to be humiliated
for comedic effect?"

Ethan: "Well—"

Brown raised one hand.

Ethan shut up instantly.

Miracle.

Brown:

"I want reparations."

Igor: "Reparations how? Money? Gold? A Netflix special?"

Brown:

"I want the author herself."

Thunder.

A crack in reality.

Typewriter keystrokes like gunfire.

Air smelled of ink and divine malpractice.

A **hand** pushed through the wallpaper.

Manuscript pages fluttered like dying doves.

Pratalia is coming.

Pratalia materialized fully now—barefoot, empty bottle of cheap white wine in one hand, manuscript in the other, eyeliner smeared enough to cause a minor landslide in the Andes.

Pratalia (cold as Russian winter):
"Brown, you're a **n-word**, face it."

The bar froze.
Even the ice cubes stopped clinking like, *"oh sh*t that escalated"*.

From outside came sirens—
then **COPS** burst in, guns drawn like half-mast erections.

Cops (rhythmic, moronic chant):
"N-word. N-word. FIRE! FIRE!"

Nobody fires, of course.
They only scream like toddlers who found the swear drawer.

A wave of **Republicans from the neighbouring gentrified suburb** swarmed through the window like locusts in khakis and boat shoes:

Republicans (clutching pearls, sipping $6 lattes):
"We're *not* racists.
They are Black.
Checkmate, liberals."

In the corner, a **Mark Twain scholar**—bow tie strangling him with irony—raised a trembling hand:

Twain Scholar (ecstatic, damp with nostalgia):
"Ah yes—how poetic!
The *good ol' antebellum* ***n-word*** archetype!
Rich in literary suffering,
marinated in generational trauma,
served best with mint julep!"

Everyone in the room gasped.
Not at the racism—
but at the pretentiousness.

Spanish moss now fully colonized the bar lamps like nature reclaiming a war crime site.

Brown stood still.
Breathing slow.
A calm before a biblical slaughter.

Brown:
"So not only am I written as a stereotype,
now I'm surrounded by every racist trope in the Western canon?"

Ethan flicked ash.
Igor poured vodka with the solemnity of a funeral.

Ethan: "Pratalia, you've pushed this into HBO-special-cancelled-after-episode-one territory."

Pratalia (shrugs):
"Good.
If this story isn't banned in three countries,
why even write it?"

Mr Brown, arms crossed, expression flat as civil-rights era sarcasm:

Mr Brown:
"Just to clarify—when you say 'n-word', do you mean nigger or nigga?
Since apparently I'm the only one here qualified to pronounce either without causing a United Nations intervention."

Pratalia shrugged like a drunk deity playing jazz with morality.

Pratalia:
"Bit of both, honestly.
Open to reader interpretation.
But aesthetically?
I lean toward the two-syllable haircut—ni-ga."

Brown test-fires it like a grenade:

Brown (testing mouthfeel):

"So Nig*ga*."

Pratalia:

"Indeed."

Brown:

"Well··· weirdly funny.

I kinda—"

A beat.

Brown:

"—NO.

No I do **NOT** like it.

That's trauma with rhythm."

Igor, unhelpful as ever, scratched his chin thoughtfully:

Igor:

"Whenever I hear it internally, my brain autocorrects to **Property™**."

Ethan snaps into a high-five like two teenagers discovering misogyny for the first time.

Ethan:
"Whooo! Dark. That joke was so black it **stole my bike**!"

Mr Brown's stare could turn milk into stone.
The silence of 400 years pressed like a foot on a neck.

Before the tension detonated, **Pratalia's phone chimed**.

bip-bip

She glanced.

Pratalia (reading):
"Oh. A cease-and-desist from the **Rosa-Parks-and-Anyone-With-Basic-Human-Decency Foundation.**
They say we're on thin ice.

And also on fire.

And also in hell."

Ethan:

"About time."

Brown:

"HEY! That line was *mine*."

Ethan:

"Too slow. I colonized it first. As white men once told black men about land and labour."

Brown:

"Boss… **come on.**"

Ethan slammed a hand on the bar as if commanding the orchestra of chaos to switch genres—
from **racism blues** to **misogyny tango**.
Same ugliness, new hat.

Ethan:

"Ok, ok. Let's steer this ship off the reef and straight

into another one.

Misogyny. Machismo. Mansplaining. Gaslighting.

If we're sinking, we might as well hit every iceberg in the catalogue."

Brown raised his glass, cheerful as a hyena at a funeral buffet:

Brown:
"Now *that* I can get behind.
Nothing like shared bigotry to unite men."

Igor bowed like a butler in hell:

Igor:
"Say the word, master.
I'll unleash Aristotle's entire bitterness toward women."

Ethan cracked open *Anna Karenina* again—
like a bible for the morally bankrupt:

Ethan:

"In Part 5, Chapter 22, about Count Alexei Alexandrovich Karenin, it literally says:

'All women, simply as women, were frightening and repulsive to him.'

Call him wrong if you dare."

Brown slammed the bar.

Brown:

"Gospel. Canon. Scripture."

Igor, smug and dangerous, invoked dead Romans like trading cards:

Igor:

"**Mulier malum necessarium.**

(Woman: the necessary evil.)"

Brown:

"I was going to say that."

(He absolutely wasn't.)

Igor escalated, eyes glowing with patriarchal Latin fury:

Igor:

"Dum femina plorat, decipere laborat.

(When a woman cries, she's working to deceive.)"

Brown:

"Ok I was definitely NOT going to say that."

Igor continued, unstoppable now—
like a papal bull after espresso:

Igor:

"Avarum est mulierum genus.

(Women are naturally greedy.)"

Brown:

"That one though—yes. Preach."

Igor rolled on:

Igor:

"Novi ingenium mulierum: nolunt ubi velis, ubi

nolis cupiunt ultro.

(I know the nature of women: deny them and they desire you; desire them and they run.)"

Brown:

"TELL THEM IGOR!"

Igor slapped down another:

Igor:

"Dos est uxoria lites.

(The dowry brings quarrels with a wife.)"

Brown squinted:

"...*lites*. Yes. Sounds legal."

Igor crescendo'd:

Igor:

"Quod non potest diabolus, mulier evincit.

(What the devil can't manage, a woman will accomplish.)"

Brown:

"...*incit! Evincit!* That's the stuff!"

Ethan pinched the bridge of his nose like a weary father on a roadtrip to Hell:

Ethan:
"I should NOT have signed Igor up for that correspondence course in Latin misogyny."

But Igor was too far gone now—
face illuminated by the ghost of Cicero:

Igor (rattling on like a broken misogyny jukebox):
"Fallere, flere, nere, statuit Deus in muliere!
(Deceive, weep, spin—God built these traits in women!)
Mulieri credere? Stultum est!
Ubi femina, ibi chaos!
Uxorem habere? Melius hostem!
Mulier? Tempestas cum perfume!
Lingua mulieris lamina gladii—munda sed occidit!"

The **sound fades**, but Igor continues chanting—like a Gregorian choir of toxic masculinity echoing into eternity.

Latin misogyny fills the bar like incense at a sexist Vatican.

Ethan and Brown stare into the middle distance—two men ashamed and delighted at once.

Ethan (softly):
"Should we stop him?"

Brown:
"Do *men* ever stop other men when they're confidently wrong?"

Ethan:
"...no. We film it."

He pulls out a phone.

Brown poses with a thumbs up.

Igor, in the background, still chanting:
"Mulier ad aurum sicut apis ad mel!
Femina? Lupus in seda!
Eva prima dona, peccatum secunda!"

Fade to misogynistic Latin echo.

Brown leaned over his glass with the sincerity of a sinner negotiating beer prices with God.

Brown:
"Boss, I never heard you misogynizing your wife.
Never heard you call her *the warden*, *the fun drain*, *the old ball and chain*, *the monthly apocalypse*—
none of the classics.
Why's that?"

Ethan didn't even think. He just answered, quick as a guillotine:

Ethan:

"Because I can't.

She's my partner in life.

My witness, co-conspirator, reason I haven't burned down the post office.

My **best friend**."

Brown blinked.

Something moved in his heart cavity—possibly emotion, possibly indigestion.

Brown:

"Wasn't the dog your best friend?"

Ethan:

"Yes, yes—universally. **Canine category undisputed.**

But among humans? Wife is best human friend."

Igor, who never misses a chance to casually devastate Brown, chimed in like a funeral trumpet:

Igor:

"And let us reiterate it, Brown—

you are merely his best acquaintance.

A tolerated presence.

A background NPC with sad jazz undertone."

Brown's soul visibly deflated, like a balloon losing will to exist.

Brown:

"Oh..."

The bar went quiet in sympathy for his dignity's passing.

Then Igor made it worse, joyfully:

Igor:

"Master, shall we introduce Brown to Wife's sister?"

(He said "Wife's sister" like offering him a lottery ticket and a rabid ferret simultaneously.)

Brown lit up.

Eyes wide.

Puppy seeing leash.

Brown:

"Oh—Will you, boss?

A sister-in-law unit?

A woman who **might lower her standards enough to notice me**?"

Ethan leaned back, theatrical, as if revealing a mystic spell to summon eldritch in-laws.

Ethan:

"You don't need me.

Say her name three times

and she shall materialize

in **fire, sulphur, and unspoken grievances.**"

Brown: gulp.

Ethan:

"But choose wisely.

She brings drama.

She brings chaos.

She brings opinions about your shoes.

Once summoned, she never leaves."

Igor dimmed the lights with a switch no one remembers installing.

The bar flickered like a séance.

Brown stood in the center, nervous and hopeful—
a man who had survived racism, misogyny, and Latin aphorisms,
but now faced the **ultimate horror: wife's sister**.

He inhaled deeply, like an adventurer about to call a demon.

Brown:

"...What's her name?

So I may summon her."

Ethan grinned.

A grin of doom.

A grin of fate.

Ethan:

"Her name is—"

Thunder.

Glass rattled.

Cat hissed.

And Ethan whispers:

"Margherita."

ETHAN AND THE TAUROMACHY

Brown was standing there, hands buried in his pockets like he was afraid they might commit a crime without supervision. Boots half-sunk in peat, fed-up expression standard issue. The marsh breathed. Frogs judged them silently.

Ethan stood beside him, elegant like a war crime in a tux. Cradling a Beretta 486 Parallelo, polished walnut gleaming as though the Pope himself had waxed it with holy tears. He licked his thumb, tested the wind like he was calculating artillery trajectories.

Then he yelled:

“Pull!”

Like a waiter shouting "Service!" only with more imminent homicide.

Igor, faithful as a rash, responded by grabbing a startled peasant by the belt, spinning twice like an Olympian discus-thrower who never finished primary school, and **launched the poor bastard into the sky**.

For half a second the man flapped comically, as if he believed—deep down—that dignity included flight.

Ethan raised the gun, two smooth movements, bang-BANG!
Both barrels.
A **Wilhelm scream** cut the cold morning like poetry on ketamine.

Then meat met gravity.
The peasant plummeted, limp, straight into the bog like a sack of potatoes that owed money.

Splush.
Silence.
A distant duck quacked in approval.

Brown, nodding with the solemn respect of a sommelier sniffing a cork:
“Nice shot, boss.”

Igor, beaming like a golden retriever who just learned tax evasion:
“Masterful shot, master.”

Ethan cracked the gun open, shells steaming.
He inhaled the scent of spent powder like it was Chanel N° Apocalypse.

“Ah… the humble Bepin,” he mused.
“Good old serf. Trusty bondman. Flies like no pigeon would. Ah, the refreshing sport of peasant shooting. Ah, the noble art of poaching. Ah, the tauromachy!”

Brown blinked.
“Tauromachy is bullfighting, boss.”

Ethan smiled the smile of a man incorrect with confidence.

“Exactly.”

📻 *We pause here for a commercial.* 📻

🎶 *Cue Vivaldi played by a firing squad.* 🎶
Golden sunlight. Slow-motion ducks. Except not ducks—peasants wearing burlap and existential dread.

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Grandma hangs her rosary, grandson hangs his quarry.

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And now back to the show.
Camera returns, marsh still damp with regret.
Brown lights a cigarette off the barrel, Igor wiping

swamp-peasant off his sleeves, Ethan looking into distance like Napoleon wondering where to park.

Ethan, shotgun now resting casually over his shoulder like a child's toy stolen from a war museum, addressed the universe with the swagger of a man who had *never once* checked the price of anything before buying it.

"Ah, you inferior commoners," he proclaimed, arms wide as if greeting both dawn and malpractice lawsuit. **"What can *you* know about the *tauromachy*, the noble art of rejoining man and nature? Of the ancient trials of the gentleman class? Three great challenges — carved not on tablet nor stone, but in the trembling livers of peasants everywhere."**

Brown scratched himself nervously. Igor tilted his head like a dog hearing Latin.

Ethan held up a finger.

“One: To cross the Pole on a sled with a dog, while gently petting a Duke — *the hereditary titled man*, Brown, not John Wayne. Though petting John Wayne would've also been fine, provided one survived the experience.”

He lifted a second finger.

“Two: Blast through the toll pass at 220 kilometers per hour — *that exquisitely masculine challenge*, where only the brave or the stupid may pass, and often the nobleman is both at once.”

Third finger — ring adorned with some stolen family crest that probably once belonged to a bishop.

“And three — timeless, eternal, whispered by monks and drunks alike — drinking the Sargasso Sea.”

Brown stared at him as one does a man reenacting scripture while holding dynamite.

“But boss,” Brown said, polite as a funeral director, **“nobody knows the size of the Sargasso Sea. It's an approximate region bounded by ocean currents that continuously change their course.”**

Ethan smiled like Lucifer hearing jazz.

“Exactly, my commoner friend. A *problem* for the inferior creature — a *challenge* for the nobleman.”

He turned toward the village skyline. A cathedral stabbed the horizon — perfect, arrogant, smug in its stained-glass righteousness. Ethan planted his boots in the mud like roots tasting blood.

“Now stand aside,” he declared, voice rumbling with aristocratic delirium, **“as I shall drive a golf ball straight through the cathedral’s stained-glass window.”**

A breeze whispered *don't*.
History begged *please no*.
Ethan lived for *yes*.

Igor straightened, chest proud, eyes shining with servantly devotion bordering devotional-cult-energy.

"Shall I gather the Driver, master?"

Ethan extended his hand like Caesar demanding grapes.

"You shall, Igor, my good servant — you shall."

Igor trotted to the equipment case — genuine leather, made from a cow that died of boredom in a noble stable — and reverently extracted a **custom gold-plated driver**, engraved with Ethan's family motto:

"Si Facta Non Sufficiunt, Addo Explosivos."
(If deeds are not enough, I add explosives.)

He presented it kneeling.

Ethan accepted it like Excalibur.

Brown exhaled. *Of course this was happening.*

Ethan lined up, feet apart, posture elegant like a duelist about to ask for foie gras. One slow breath. One perfect swing.

CRACK.

The ball shot off the tee like a soul escaping purgatory.
A white dot of doom, straight toward God's favorite window.

It pierced the **original 13th-century stained glass** — the one tourists photographed, historians wept over, and insurance agents had recurring nightmares about.
A rain of colored shards fell like confetti at a wedding between blasphemy and architecture.

From inside, a voice erupted:

“MADONNA PUTT—” *(censored only by acoustics and chimney echo)*
followed by theological creativity involving goats, pigeons, and what surely must be canonically forbidden uses of a thurible.

The abbot burst out, red-faced, vestments flying, wielding a double-handed crucifix like he meant business. His Italian rose to operatic heights: saints compared to stable animals, the Virgin Mary analogized to a barnyard goose, holy patriarchs equated with cheap circus donkeys, and the Trinity demoted to municipal garbage collectors.

Ethan, unconcerned, offered a cheerful wave:

“Most esteemed regards, abbot! Top of the morning to you!”

The abbot escalated to *Old Testament*-grade profanity.
Cherubim were likened to ferrets.
Saint Francis to a diseased beaver.
Christ himself briefly became a "fisherman with syphilitic hands."

Ethan turned away, ignoring the ecclesiastical meltdown behind him, golf club lounging over his shoulder like an aristocrat's parasol.

"Brown, my humble acquaintance," he said, strolling through shards of medieval holiness, **"I shall require your services. I need a scribe to fair-copy my latest manuscript — *'The Five Base Elements: Air, Earth, Air, Fire, and Cashmere.'* Cashmere we were, and to Cashmere we shall return."**

Brown, resigned to employment by madness: **"Sure thing, boss."**

Igor, instantly too eager:
“Shall I bring the shearing scissors and some sheep, master?”

Ethan tapped him on the forehead with the driver like knighting a moron.

“Oh, Brown, good acquainted serf — why don’t you learn the noble art of sheep shearing? Chop chop, off you shear.”

Brown blinked.
Then blinked again, slower.
He looked at a sheep. The sheep looked back, unimpressed.

Somewhere, the abbot was still shouting obscenities about St. Joseph and a wheelbarrow.

And then — like curtains slamming shut on a fever dream of aristocratic blasphemy — they **all woke up.**

Ethan in silk pajamas, Brown tangled in sheets like a crashed kite, Igor upside-down on his mattress for reasons unknown even to God.

Three alarm clocks rang in three rooms like synchronized artillery.
Three men stared at the ceiling thinking:

What in the nine hells was THAT?

Ethan rubbed his temples, tasted guilt, victory, and parmesan.
He rang the bell — literal bell — on his bedside table.

General meeting. Living room. Attendance mandatory.

Minutes later they sat like survivors of a very polite war.
Coffee steamed. Hangovers negotiated.

Ethan cleared his throat, serious as a bishop selling indulgences wholesale.

“Igor, where did you pick those mushrooms we had earlier in the risotto?”

Igor blinked with innocent stupidity, cherubic and dangerous.

“From the Abby forest, master.”

Brown frowned.

“Abby forest?”

Igor nodded, proud, like he’d invented the alphabet.

“Abby something forest.”

Ethan leaned forward, detective mode triggered by mild panic.

“Abby *something*? Abby *what*?”

Igor snapped his fingers, triumphant:

“Abbey *normal* forest.”

Ethan stared.

Brown stared.

“Ab-normal forest?” Ethan repeated, voice cracked like egg on skillet.

Igor shrugged with serene stupidity.
“I’m almost sure that was the name.”

Brown sipped his coffee like whiskey.
“Well, that explains it.”

Ethan exhaled, resigned to fate, destiny, and intestinal hallucinations.

“Igor, my humble servant,” he declared, **“please go and gather more shrooms from said abnormal woods.”**

Igor lit up like he’d been given a Nobel.

“At once, master!”
He marched out proudly, wearing only socks and a cape he had no memory of owning.

Brown watched him go.

“Boss, should we… stop him?”

Ethan leaned back, wicked grin blooming.

“No, Brown. Let the dog chase the car. Let chaos rip. For today — we brunch.”

Brown nodded slowly.

“I’ll brew more coffee.”

Ethan: “And fetch the shotgun.”

Brown: “…why the shotgun for brunch?”

Ethan:

“Because last time he brought back mushrooms, we almost married a goat.”

Brown: “Right. Same shotgun as goat wedding or fresher one?”

Ethan:

“Fresher one. Weddings require elegance.”

ETHAN SWIRLED THE N-TH OLD FASHIONED

Ethan swirled the n-th Old Fashioned like it contained the secrets of the universe, which it did not, because Ethan had drunk those earlier. The house was a tomb of sleeping mammals: Brown face-down like a tranquilized buffalo; Wife curled like an angelic pretzel; Cat sprawled over her like a tyrant in fur pajamas; Dog belly-up, dreaming of sausages and colonial crimes; and Igor—well, Igor in *standby mode*: spine straight, eyes half-open, humming faintly like an Eastern Bloc refrigerator with unresolved trauma.

But Ethan?
Nope.
Conscious. Tragically.

Outside, the window was a black mirror. Inside, Tony Bennett was crooning with the velvety cruelty of someone who's *never* been rejected by the girl in

the front row. Ethan sipped, winced, and let nostalgia kick him straight in the teeth.

Ah, youth.
That museum of idiocy.

Because honestly—*who the hell* hasn't fallen headfirst for the girl in the front row? The pretty one, the dumb one, the one *you* were even dumber for liking. The cosmic joke of adolescence: Cupid blindfolded, drunk, and armed with a staple gun.

And then the bar.
Oh, the bar.

Where Nietzsche and Marx—*those two freeloading philosophers*—would shake hands like they'd just invented socialism together on the cocktail napkin. They'd chat about the last party:
—"Dionysian chaos, fabulous lighting," Nietzsche would say.
—"Deeply exploitative drinks pricing," Marx would say.

And then, inevitably, **that** girl.
The one who slept with everyone except you.
Not for moral reasons.
Not for romantic reasons.
Not even for logistical reasons.
Just out of sheer cosmic spite, as if the universe pointed at Ethan and whispered:
"Not him. Anyone but him."

Ethan sighed, sipped, and stared at the sleeping household like a war general surveying the survivors of the Great Stupidity Battles of His Youth.

Tony Bennett crooned.
Ethan drank.
The past mocked him gently.

And somewhere in the dark, Igor's battery reached 97%, and his left eyelid twitched— a sure sign trouble was about to wake up.

Ethan let the Old Fashioned settle on his tongue like a judgmental aunt, while the flashback swung

open like a rusty cellar door and dragged him straight inside.

Ah yes.
The Era of the Poor Dumb Losers.
Trademark pending.

Endless nights spent being poor, dumb, and losers—economy size bundle, three-for-one special. They weren't just broke. They were cosmically broke. They had to *borrow lint*. And the stupidity? Olympic level. If idiocy had a national team, they were first-string midfielders.

Flashback: Eons ago, back when Ethan was ashamed of himself in ways only hindsight and bourbon can excavate.

"And here we are again, right back where we started," the Past-Ethan muttered, kicking open the door of memory.
Driving around at three in the morning, looking for something—

What?
No clue.
A sign?
Enlightenment?
A kebab stand still open?
Who knows. Certainly not them.

With a tenner you can't get far; hell, you can't even buy regret on installment. Some nights it wouldn't even cover a sad, cold pizza slice that looked like abandonment under a heat lamp.

Then the dogs—
those heroic idiots.
Howling like they'd invented heartbreak. Chasing after some female who told them, with divine indifference: "Nah."

And now look at them strutting around like they just won the Palme d'Or for Best Canine Drama.
Later, they'll slink home with the exact same energy Ethan and his crew carried at that age:
that tragic testosterone-fueled shuffle of

“We tried. We failed. We will forget everything by noon.”

Back in the car: this is the sacred hour for big ideas.
The 3 A.M. Board Meeting of the Universe.
“Let’s become billionaires!”
“Let’s invent something!”
“What?”
“Everything already exists.”
“…Except maybe the solar parking disc.”
“What the hell is a solar parking disc?”
“Doesn’t matter. We’ll get rich before sunrise.”

And the backup plan, always the backup plan:
Rock stars.
Drop everything.
Move to New York.
Blow the roof off the world.

Then silence. Then someone looks around and asks, with admirable realism:
“With these faces of ours… where exactly are we going?”

Ethan chuckled bitterly in his armchair.
God, he was so happy he wasn't back there anymore.
A faint wisp of nostalgia rose—just the situation itself, the camaraderie, the stupidity that was *uniquely theirs*, handcrafted idiocy, artisanal dumbness.

But the disgust?
Oh, the disgust burned hotter than the bourbon.
He couldn't stand the version of himself he was back then.

He loved the memory.
He hated the man.

And Tony Bennett, the smug bastard, kept singing like nothing had ever gone wrong.

Ethan raised the glass, let the ice clink like a tiny percussion section, and asked himself the question that ruins perfectly good nights:

“And now? Am I happy? Carefree?”

Tony Bennett swooped in right on cue—
the cosmic jukebox trolling him from above:

As I walk down the street
seems everyone I meet
gives me a friendly hello.
I guess I'm just a lucky so and so…

Ethan snorted. Lucky. Sure. Why not.
He had Igor, the Slavic Squirrel of Doom, climbing every tree in the neighborhood like a battery-powered Tarzan. And the tree owners? They didn’t even complain anymore. They waved. They offered lemonade. Some even gave Igor cookies, which was irresponsible on levels requiring UN intervention.

And Igor sang.
Oh, he **sang**.
In a variety of keys not recognized by Western music theory.

But Ethan couldn't deny it: the little freak had charm.

Igor climbs up into every tree
but the tree owners are all so neighborly.
Igor sings wherever he goes.
I guess I'm just a lucky so and so…

Then came the money bit—literally:

If you should ask me the amount
in my bank account
I'd have to confess that I'm slippin'…

Ethan nodded at the speaker like, "Preach, Tony."
Finances were… let's call them **interpretive**.
Abstract art.
Quantum theory.
Funds that were both there and not there,
depending on whether you opened the banking app.

But did he worry?
Not really.

Because the next line fit him better than his own shoes:

…but that don't worry me, confidentially
I've got a dream that's a pippin'…

He didn't know what the dream was, but sure—call it a pippin. Sounds stylish.

And then Tony delivered the killing blow:

And when the day is through
each night I hurry to a home
where Brown, and Igor, and the cat,
and the dog,
and wife-love waits, I know.
I guess I'm just a lucky so and so.

Ethan exhaled.
Long.
Quiet.
The kind of breath you release when your heart finally untenses.

Because, damn it, Tony was right.
He wasn't back there anymore—
in the stupidity, the insecurity, the nights of hunger and heroic idiocy.

Now he came home to:
Brown, unconscious on the couch like a tranquilized ox.
Igor, humming in sleep-mode like a haunted toaster.
Cat, curled atop Wife like a furry, judgmental crown.
Dog, dreaming of sausages and divine mischief.
Wife, warm and steady as a lighthouse.

Lucky?
Yeah.
Against all odds, against all logic, against all historical evidence:

Ethan was a lucky so and so.

And he raised his Old Fashioned to the window—
to Tony, to youth, to stupidity,
and to the strange, beautiful circus he called home.

Brown, in the deepest cavern of sleep, drifted into **his usual dream**—the one as predictable as Igor's malfunctions and as bizarre as Ethan's finances.

There he was again:
Calimero.
The eternally miserable black chick who spoke perfect Italian for reasons no theologian, biologist, or cartoonist has ever explained. And Brown—being Brown—identified with him in ways a therapist would label "concerning" and immediately bill extra hours for.

Dream-Calimero waddled into view, gigantic eyes shiny with cosmic injustice, trying once again to do something noble: return a lost wallet, help an old hen cross the road, restore social order among farm animals—whatever. And, as always, it all blew up in his beak.

Cue the yelling.
Cue the rejection.
Cue the tiny poultry meltdown.

Calimero sprinted away, fluff trembling, muttering:
"**È un'ingiustizia però!** Nobody wants me because I'm small and black!"

And right on schedule—floating into the scene like a detergent-scented Valkyrie—
Mira Lanza, the Dutch lady of household miracles.

"Ma no, Calimero," she'd coo, patting his head like a malfunctioning appliance.
"You're not black… you're just dirty!"

And Brown, in dream-logic mode, would accept this revelation with explosive relief, as if all of life's complexity boiled down to simple poultry hygiene.

Mira would pull out the holy relic: **Ava detergent**.
She scrubbed.
She rinsed.

She activated the supernatural cleaning properties granted by 1960s advertising budgets.

And lo—
Calimero emerged **white**.
Radiantly, ridiculously white.
White like fresh laundry.
White like Igor after a winter in the basement.
White like the soul Ethan pretends he doesn't have.

Brown always sighed in the dream at that moment, blissful and weightless, as if detergent could solve everything: heartbreak, taxes, existential despair.

Meanwhile, in the waking world, Brown drooled on the pillow and murmured in Italian:
"È un'ingiustizia però…"

Ethan, half-drunk in his armchair, glanced over and whispered:
"Yes, Brown. It usually is."

Igor, meanwhile, had migrated into the **deep REM zone known only to Slavic technicians and malfunctioning forest spirits**. There he hung—literally—upside down from the old radio cord like a bat whose warranty had expired in 1973. Spine at 90° , eyelids half-twitching, toes curled around the wire with monk-like discipline.

Then—
CRACKLE··· hissss··· bzzzz···

The ancient radio, which no one had turned on since the Carter administration, suddenly spat out a ghost-transmission, straight from **Radio London, 1944**:

"Jean a des longues moustaches."
(The coded message for "bro, it's D-Day, let's go.")

Igor's eyes snapped open like a pair of Soviet floodlights.

No hesitation.
No confusion.
No pause for coffee.

With a single gymnastic twist, he dismounted the cord, landed silently like a disgruntled ninja, and whispered:
“ *The moustaches are long. Understood.*”

He lifted the couch cushion.
Normal humans find: crumbs, old coins, remote controls.
Igor found: **grenades**.
Plural.
Variety pack.
Assorted colors.

He stuffed them into his bathrobe—because Igor sleeps in a bathrobe, obviously—tightened the belt like a partisan preparing for glory, and sprinted toward the door with battlefield determination.

Ethan, still in his armchair, Old Fashioned mid-sip, watched him zoom past with grim serenity.

“Where are you going, Igor?” Ethan asked, because somebody had to at least attempt due diligence.

Igor, already halfway out the window:
“To assist the Allied landings, master! Something must be sabotaged before dawn!”

“What something?”

Igor shrugged in patriotic frenzy:
“Random thing. Improvised target. Spirit of Churchill will guide my hands!”

And off he vanished into the night:
a barefoot, grenade-stuffed, bathrobe-wearing guerrilla squirrel-man,
heading out to commit sabotage against—
…well, against *whatever he first encountered with bad vibes*.

A recycling bin?
A statue?
A rogue lawnmower?
Hard to tell.

Ethan raised his glass in a weary toast to the moon.

“Good luck, Allies.”

A shriek split the dawn like a cheap horror-movie sound effect.

THE WILHELM SCREAM.
High. Tragic.
Brown-flavored.

“Boss! Boss, help boss!” Brown yelped, barreling into the living room like a buffalo who’d stepped on a mousetrap.

Ethan didn’t even stand. He just squinted over his Old Fashioned, pupils narrow with suspicion.

“Brown,” he said, “did you touch the cat?”

Brown: “No, boss, I—”

“Did you *try* to touch the cat?”

“Boss, I just—”

“Did you exist,” Ethan continued, voice cold as frozen vodka, “in the *vicinity* of the cat?”

Brown froze. Calculated. Deflated.
“Well…”

“That counts as attempted touching,” Ethan declared, judge-jury-executioner.
“Did you try to touch it because it’s black like you?”

“Boss, come on…” Brown whimpered.

Ethan leaned forward, finger raised like a disappointed prophet.
“The cat is actually black. *You*, my dear Brown, are like Calimero: NOT black. Only dirty.”

“BOSS!”

“What? Am I wrong? You spent all day yesterday playing with your Lego constructions in the yard, then at night refused to shower. Ergo: filth.”

Brown: “…I’ll shower.”

Ethan: “Now.”

Brown, trying to muster dignity: “But boss—”

And from the corridor, with the calm authority of a deity who pays the mortgage:

Wife: “Mister Brown. Shower. Now.”

Instant obedience.
Brown deflated like a punctured parade balloon.

“Yes ma’am…” he muttered, pouting his way toward the bathroom, shoulders slumped, soul broken, dignity evaporated like warm gin.

As he went, he grumbled under his breath:
“…un’ingiustizia però…”

The cat, from its throne on the windowsill, blinked softly.
It had already forgiven him.
It had also already planned his next punishment.

ETHAN AND THE PAINS-IN-THE-ASS

Ethan lounged on the armchair like a philosopher who'd given up on philosophy five minutes ago and taken up recreational despair instead.

Ethan: "Igor, oh Igor, my humble, faithful servant. Thou who fell in love with the Latin language. Thou, Igor, enamored of the classics, infatuated with Latin, thou who loved Latin *unam plus quam Catullus se atque suos amavit omnes*. Yes, right thou, Igor—bear in thy mind, thy attitude and thy actions, these maxima: *memento omittere, tacere, nihil agere, memento ne credas, memento ne fidas.*"

Igor blinked twice, the slow, amphibian blink of a man who found comfort in conjugating verbs but not in decoding Ethan's existential melodramas.

Igor: "Bad mood, master?"

Ethan waved a hand with the elegance of a drunk saint blessing a very confused congregation.

Ethan: “Just watching at being from close. Macro lens. I’ve looked at being from both sides now, from up and down and still somehow it’s being’s illusions I recall. I really don’t know being at all.”

Igor nodded, because nodding had a 93% historical success rate in keeping Ethan from escalating into interpretive dance.

Igor: “Shall I bring the forgetting brandy forward, master?”

Ethan: “At least two bottles, Igor. I want the full metaphysical lobotomy.”

Igor: “Yes, master.”

Igor left the room with the solemnity of a monk fetching holy relics, except instead of relics it was a double-brick of Armenian 68-proof amnesia in glass

form. Ethan exhaled like a man preparing to misinterpret the universe yet again.

And somewhere in the house, Mr. Brown sensed trouble the way a prairie dog senses a hawk's shadow — instinctively, inaccurately, and far too late.

Ethan, already swirling the brandy like it owed him money, launched into song with the soulful conviction of a lounge singer who'd been fired from every lounge.

Ethan:
"It's very clear
The pains-in-the-ass are here to stay
Not for a year
But ever and a day
Oh, my dear Igor,
The pains-in-the-ass are here to stay
In time the Rockies may crumble
Gibraltar may tumble

They're only made of clay
But the pains-in-the-ass are here to stay."

He ended with a flourish — hand in the air, chest puffed, eyes rolled so dramatically skyward that even the ceiling felt judged.

Igor, holding the bottle like an offering to a temperamental deity, bowed just a little.

Igor: “You seem to be a very equilibrated man, master, in the meaning that you have a chip on each shoulder.”

Ethan: “Igor… my subtle servant, my philosophical mosquito, ever buzzing truths into my ear.”

He took the bottle, drank from it like it was communion, and continued:

Ethan:
“There will come a day when all the pains-in-the-ass will disappear, yes.
And I’ll be right there, ready to talk with the lemons.

If and when we die — which is not guaranteed, mind you — we'll have a tailor-made paradise. Exactly like the usual bar, but the drinks are free and don't give a hangover.
A paradise of irresponsible indulgence. A place where the barman never judges and the tab never exists."

Igor nodded slowly, as if he, too, envisioned Heaven as a cocktail lounge with better lighting.

Ethan raised his hand again, in grand prophetic fervor:

Ethan:
"And as for getting in… oh, Igor.
I want to see who gets chosen, with so many applicants.
Between sad saints and us, the fun ones.
I want to see who gets hired in heaven — despite a thousand justifications — between us and the entire mass of pains-in-the-ass."

There was a beat of silence.

Then — a crash from the hallway.

Mr. Brown had dropped something. Probably his courage.

Because whenever Ethan started discussing metaphysics, paradise, and lemons, Brown knew the night was about to get *weird*.

— CRASH —

Something in the hallway exploded with the force and dignity of a wardrobe giving up on life.

Ethan, eyebrows ascending like twin rockets of indignation:

“But who is that, that, that… dumbass who keeps banging the door and slamming it shut while yelling?”

Igor, ever the loyal informant — the Stasi agent of household chaos — snapped to attention and pointed like a Roman accuser in a toga.

Igor: “Brown, Master! It was Brown!”

Brown, stumbling into the doorway with the grace of a man who had never successfully coordinated his limbs:

“Who’s knocking, boss?”

Ethan, deadpan enough to flatten cities:

“Oh, I don’t know, myself.”

Igor, seizing the moment to weaponize helpfulness, adjusted his imaginary glasses, leaned forward, and announced with bureaucratic solemnity:

“Master, if I may clarify for the record: the knocking was performed by Mr. Brown, the yelling was performed by Mr. Brown, the slamming was also performed by Mr. Brown, and the crash was—statistically speaking—99.3% likely to have been caused by Mr. Brown’s interaction with gravity, doorframes, or his own existential incompetence.”

Brown: “Hey!”

Igor: “Correction: 99.4%.”

Brown, puffing himself up like a disgruntled pigeon:

“Snitches get stitches.”

Igor, delighted — delighted — to receive such a setup on a silver platter, cocked his head.

“Oh yeah? Made of what? Cotton?”

He produced the now proverbial, eternally materializing tray of raw cotton balls with the flourish of a Vegas magician.

“Here, pick some.”

Brown’s face folded inward like an origami of misery.

He pouted. He deflated. He looked like a man who’d just been told Santa was a pyramid scheme.

Ethan, rising like an intoxicated Homeric prophet, brandy in hand and delusions in pocket:

"Fear not, my useless crew.

Reason will prevail.

Through perils without number now have we reach'd;

To this the short remaining watch, that yet

Our senses have to wake, refuse not proof

Of the unpeopled world, following the track

Of Phoebus. Call to mind from whence ye sprang:

Ye were not form'd to live the life of brutes,

But virtue to pursue and knowledge high."

He finished with a wobbling, grandiose gesture that nearly baptized the carpet with brandy.

Igor applauded slowly, theatrically, like an overeducated seal.

Brown stared blankly.

His brain tried to process Ethan's speech, got halfway, tripped over "Phoebus," and decided to simply reboot.

Brown: "Boss… what does that mean?"

Ethan: "It means, Brown, that even in the grand cosmic theatre… you still have to pick the damn cotton."

Brown: “Does it mean…”

BIG BEN CHIME.

Ding-dong-dang-ding-dong-DANG.

Pratalia tears through the narration like a chainsaw through wet cardboard.

Pratalia:

“Oh, Brown, Brown, Brown…

It means you’re a nigga, the designated historically-exploited archetype, my dear.

You belong on a plantation — narratively speaking —

And you belong being told you're not black, you're just dirty.

But fear not! Even dirt can be defeated with… Ava Detergent™."

Brown, now wearing half an eggshell as a hat, looking like a newborn chick of misery:

"So I am the whole narration punching bag, am I not?"

Pratalia, Ethan, Igor — in perfect Gregorian-chant unison:

(solemn nodding)

Brown:

"Ma è un'ingiustizia però…"

Pratalia:

“Oh sì, tesoro.

But this isn’t justice.

This is literature.”

Ethan (raising brandy): “And very low literature at that.”

Igor: “The kind where Brown receives more hits than the British Museum.”

Brown: “I want a new contract…”

Pratalia: “Shh, shh, shh. Punching bags don’t negotiate.”

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ETHAN WAS SPIKING HIS BOURBON WITH SOME COFFEE

It was 6:38 in the morning and Ethan was spiking his bourbon with some coffee, the way responsible adults don't. The kitchen light was too honest. The clock ticked like it had a grudge.

Mr. Brown observed him with no wonder at all. Zero curiosity. The face of a man who had seen worse before breakfast and expected worse before lunch.

Brown: "One of *those* mornings, eh, boss?"

Ethan didn't look up. He stirred. The spoon clinked against the glass like a tiny hammer tapping a coffin nail.

Ethan: "You can say that, Brown. You can say that."

Brown: “Wrong foot out of bed? I know a joke about that. Involves nuns, a slipper, and a lawsuit.”

Ethan finally turned, eyes red, calm, dangerous in the way philosophers are dangerous right before ruining a party.

Ethan:
“The fact of being, Brown. Being. Being hurts. And there’s no tramadol for that.
Being—hanging around here like contraband.
Like a thief, always ready to bolt.

Every age carries inside it the rites of drifting, of error, of insight.
With its games of carom and postponement. Taking and giving.

May we die only a little, now and then.
May it be slowly that we go on dying.

Every day is another day thrown in for free.
Every night a black hole to be filled.
Even if I've never seen it truly filled, so to speak.

All that remains is the usual scream, shouted out:
try and act.

May we cry only a little—because it's a waste.
And then laugh about how it will all end.

Those few times I knock with clubs,
they answer me with swords. Or with money.

We give reason to the assholes. Or to the gamblers.
We'll always stay one point short of the champions.
Thirteen is a tie.

May we lose, because we're three times too decent.
And may we win only in extraordinary dreams.

They told us to stop making noise. Not to disturb.
So we'll sing only in secret, without raising our voices.

Then, grinning, we'll slip away little by little.
To sit by the river and wait.

And even if I've never seen it filled—so to speak—what's left is just the usual scream, shouted: *trying, acting*.

Let us cry only a little, because it's a waste.
And then laugh at how it's all going to end."

Silence.

The coffee machine beeped, offended by the vibe.

Brown stared at Ethan for a long second. Then another. Then nodded, slowly, like a man accepting a weather forecast he couldn't change.

Brown: "…shit, boss."

He reached for the glass.

Brown: "Fancy sharing some of that coffee-stained bourbon?"

Ethan slid it across the counter.

Ethan: “Careful. It contains traces of existence.”

Brown took a sip, winced, smiled.

Brown: “Yeah. Tastes about right.”

Ethan: “Nothing new, Brown. Nothing new.”

Igor appeared out of thin air with a soft *plop*, like a dew drop giving up on gravity and landing in a puddle. He adjusted his posture as if teleporting were mildly impolite.

Igor: “Shall I project the illusion hologram, master?”

Ethan waved a hand, tired, permissive, magnanimous like a dying emperor granting clemency to a goat.

Ethan: “You may, Igor. My pointless servant. You may.”

Igor produced an indefinable contraption—half accordion, half toaster, entirely illegal—and pressed a button. The kitchen flickered, coughed, and collapsed into something else.

Now it was a bar. Late night. Always late night. Sticky counter. Yellow light. The smell of citrus peel, stale beer, and decisions that had aged badly.

Ethan leaned on the bar as if he'd been born there.

Ethan:
"Same story, same place, same bar.
Same people coming in, drinking, then leaving.

I don't know what I'm doing here.

I step outside a bit.
And I see the headlights of cars that stare at me,
like they're asking who we're looking for.

A couple I know. They must be half my age.

How's it going, they say.

So do I.

Then I see the wedding rings on their fingers.

Jesus fuck.

I saw them as kids just a few years ago.

They're almost closing.

Then I'll go home.

Just her. In front of me.

What do you want.

Time passes for everyone, you know.

No one brings it back.

Not even us."

Brown didn't interrupt. He never did when Ethan went like this. He simply slid the mug across the bar and handed it to Igor.

Brown: “Come on. I know you need it.”

Igor took it, sniffed once—nostalgic, reverent—and downed it in a single gulp. No pause. No breath.

Igor: “More brown. Much more.”

The bar hummed. A glass broke somewhere for symbolic reasons.
Ethan stared into nothing, nodded once, and raised his glass.

Ethan: “See? Nothing new.”

The illusion stayed. Because of course it did.

Ethan: “Igor, my *noumenon* servant, do project the Alps illusion, please.”

Igor nodded with metaphysical obedience, pressed the button again.

The bar evaporated.

They were suddenly knee-deep in a Heidi postcard: impossible green meadows, obscene blue sky, mountains pretending they'd always been there just for this shot. Cowbells somewhere, morally superior. The air smelled like milk, innocence, and lies.

Brown froze.

His lower lip trembled. Awe hit him like a pension plan he never had.

Ethan didn't look around. He never did. He spoke straight into the scenery, like accusing God but without the courtesy.

Ethan:
"When was that last time
they bought you those new sandals
at the market, in short pants,
summer hope waiting at the door,
and a dream you'll never find again,
and those sandals lasted three months,

then wrecked by running and walking—
when was that last time
they slipped onto your child's foot?

When was that last time
I saw you and maybe kissed you,
tell me now, girl from back then,
when and where did you go away,
why and when did I forget you?

It felt like it would last forever,
that absolute, violent love—
when did nothing finally end,
why did everything go dark,
it didn't even make it to September.

When was that last time
you heard your mother singing,
when at home, reading the paper,
you saw your father smoking,
while you went back to studying?

In those days now far too distant
everything was present, and the future
something left for tomorrow,
a waiting made of dream and shadow,
something uncertain, insecure.

It will be when that last time comes
that you see her and hear her speak,
when the day arrives—the last time
you'll see the sun at dawn,
and the rain and the wind blowing,
and the rhythm of your breathing,
slowly stopping, fading away."

Silence.

A cow judged them.

Brown wiped his face with the back of his hand,
nodded once, decisively, like a man who had just
understood something far too big for him.

Brown: nothing.

He turned, marched downhill, crossed the meadow, vanished past a fir tree.

A moment later, his voice echoed back.

Brown (off-screen): "I'm buying a *barrel* of grappa."

Ethan smiled faintly.

Igor reset the device.
The cow remained disappointed.

SUICIDE ATTEMPT PUNISHABLE BY DEATH

There are people who think a suicide attempt should be punishable by the death penalty. And those, Ethan thought, are the same people who give recipes on how to make ice.

Igor—the I.T. guy of the household—had been ordered to surf the web (so Ethan had expressed himself, like a late-show host from the 1990s, irony included) in search of nineteenth-century recipes for the Old Fashioned that contemplated liquors other than whiskey. Rum, brandy, whatever was around before everyone decided bourbon was a personality.

The results were impressive in the way mold is impressive.

Pages and pages of recipes on how to make homemade bitters. Fine. Nice, even. Roots, bark,

alcohol, patience. Mild self-harm but culturally accepted.

And then: ice.

“How to make your own ice.”

As in: how to solidify a bunch of monoxide di-hydrogen molecules. D.I.Y. Made at home. From scratch. Like grandma did. The old good recipe. The quintessential version. As if ice were sourdough.

Igor scrolled. Slowly. Methodically. With the dead eyes of a man watching civilization reverse.

Step one: acquire water.
Step two: put water somewhere cold.
Step three: wait.

Variants followed. Filtered water. Distilled water. Boil first. Don’t boil. Freeze fast. Freeze slow. Directional freezing. Artisanal freezing. Ice with opinions.

Igor waited patiently for the order to bring forth the shotgun and blast the PC off.

Ethan: “Brown, get summoned here immediately.”

Brown springs into the room with a clean *boiiiing*, pure Tom-and-Jerry physics, knees bending laws Newton personally signed.

Ethan: “Brown, I must put you in charge of a cotton farm.”

Brown: “Boss?”

Ethan: “A good old cotton plantation, Brown. Like your old mama— or grand-grand-grand-grand— used to work in.”

Brown: “Boss, seriously…”

Ethan: “And a big compound for housing unpaid, unwilling workers.”

Brown: “Boss, come on…”

Ethan: “It is of public service, Brown. A public, social emergency. You don’t understand. There are too many arms pulled away from farming. And they roam the earth—unemployed, unfarming, unslaved. And they do things like typing recipes for ice.”

Brown pauses. Something clicks. Gravity increases. He straightens up, eyes wide, spine locked, suddenly military.

Brown: “Sir! Ay ay sir! On the double!”

Next scene: fields and fields of cotton. Endless. Picked by recipe-givers, ice-connoisseurs, artisanal-freezing enthusiasts. Their fingers move fast. Their opinions have been confiscated.

They are whipped periodically by poorly executed clones of Dale DeGroff on horseback. The clones wear suspenders wrong, shout cocktail trivia incorrectly, and miss the beat on every swing.

Ethan (to the camera): “Boy, if life were only like this!”

Igor steps into frame and, with the calm efficiency of a stagehand who has done this before, pulls Marshall McLuhan from behind a stand-up movie poster.

Igor: “Well, that’s funny, because I happen to have Mr. McLuhan right here.”

McLuhan: “What is this? And what am I doing here? Also—you’re doing this all backwards.”

The movie stutters. Reframes. Reveals itself as a movie inside a movie. Grain increases. Lighting worsens on purpose.

Brown (to the camera of the new movie): “Boy, if life were only like this!”

McLuhan (off-camera, in the new movie): “I’m not Jewish, but I’m definitely going to collect rights on this.”

WATCH OUT FOR IGOR

Ethan leaned back, fingers steepled, the way men do when they're about to confess something that explains *everything* and excuses *nothing*.

"You see, Brown—this is how I met Igor. How *we* met. How he became··· mine."

I first noticed him behind iron bars. Not a prison, mind you. More a *circumstance*. The sort society builds when it doesn't know what to do with a presence and hopes architecture will solve it. People stared anyway. They always do.

Igor has that effect. The kind of gravity that makes gossip perspire.

They looked openly. Some at his hands. Others at—let's call it *a certain assurance*. I was raised not to point. So I watched. Quietly. Quiet is how ownership begins.

One day the door wasn't locked. No sirens. No fate trumpet. Just negligence. Someone trusted a latch. Amateur hour.

Igor stepped out like a man checking the weather and said, very calmly,
"Well. Guess today's the day."

Yes. *That* day. You already knew. Don't play innocent.

The keeper went pale. "Catastrophe! Total catastrophe! Igor's never known companionship. He's… untouched."

Which is funny, because nothing kills desire faster than the possibility it might be expected to *participate*. The crowd evaporated instantly. Appointments appeared. Emergencies multiplied. Philosophy majors fled from math.

Unfair, really. Because Igor—let's be clear—is generous, focused, and vastly superior to the

average man at physical negotiations. Ask anyone who survived.

Watch out for Igor.

Everyone ran. Everyone—except two.

An ancient woman, weathered past shame, curiosity her last remaining hobby.
And a young judge, fresh, glossy, still smelling of authority and bad decisions.

Igor surveyed the situation. Adjusted his posture. Advanced.

The old woman sighed, almost delighted.
"Well I'll be damned. Still desirable. Didn't see that coming."

The judge smiled thinly, thinking, *Surely they won't mistake me for an option.*

Reality corrected him with enthusiasm.

Now—hypothetically—if you had to choose between accumulated wisdom and institutional power, who would *you* pick?

I know my answer. I'm civilized.

Igor was not.

Watch out for Igor.

He grabbed the judge by the ear and dragged him into the bushes like an editorial correction to a deeply flawed text. No symbolism intended. Igor has never cared for metaphor.

What followed was… instructive. Memorable. Educational in ways no law school prepares you for.

All I'll say is this: the judge screamed "Mother!" using the same mouth that had signed a death warrant that morning.

Poetry exists, Brown. Sometimes it wears boots.

Watch out for Igor.

That's how we met. I didn't run. I recognized an asset.

He needed direction. I needed someone immune to authority, allergic to fear, and unimpressed by robes.

Now he serves drinks, moves bodies, and understands me without explanations.

Every household needs an Igor.

And trust me—

watch out for Igor.

ETHAN LEANED BACK, HANDS FOLDED

Ethan leaned back, hands folded, the posture of a man about to be historically smug.

Ethan:
“Igor, my **differential servant**, thou who surfed the web” — and yes, he pronounced *thou* like it had a capital letter — “do read out loud the comments under the video you just showed me.”

Igor straightened, adopting the tone of a medieval town crier who’d fallen into a YouTube comments section and never emotionally recovered.

Igor:
“Ay, master. Here they go:

— *Holding an 11 second note at 92. I'm impressed.*
— *They just don't make them like this anymore.*
— *Music was raw back then that's why they aged*

like fine wine.
— It's incredible that he had Alzheimer's disease here and still sang so beautifully.
— Thanks for gracing us with your beautiful music.
— One classy dude."

Igor paused, letting the last one land like a damp napkin on a tuxedo.

Brown squinted at the invisible screen, his brain audibly buffering.

Brown:
"Who's that about, boss?"

Ethan didn't answer immediately. He enjoyed the silence. Curated it. Framed it.

Ethan:
"I'll give you a hint, Brown: no one in the billboard of the date of today. Not now. Not in ninety-two years."

Brown's face lit up with the wrong conclusion, as usual.

Brown:
"But I like Taylor Swift."

The room temperature dropped three degrees. Somewhere, a chair judged him.

Igor slowly turned his head toward Brown, eyes flat, voice ceremonial.

Igor:
"Should I bring forward the *cat o' nine tails of 'think twice before opening your food hole again'*?"

Ethan nodded once, solemn, like a Roman senator authorizing a stabbing.

Ethan:
"You may, Igor, my **derivate servant**, you may at once."

Brown recoiled, hands up, survival instincts finally punching through.

Brown:
“Ok ok, I take it back. Geez.”

The cat o’ nine tails remained theoretical.
Which somehow made it worse.

Igor cleared his throat with the gravity of a man about to do something wildly inappropriate for his job description.

Igor:
“Mr Brown, listen here:

A song is a pen and a sheet of paper, so fragile between these fingers.
It is what it is not.
It’s the grass-is-greener wish.
And yet it can be as complex as life.

A song is a vague butterfly slipping away in the light air,

a blue smudge,
a yellow rose,
a breath of wind at dusk,
a firefly lit in a meadow,
a sigh made out of nothing.

But sometimes — if it grips you — it stays with you forever.
And it's written by almost normal people,
with a soul like a child,
who now and then grows wings
and plays hide-and-seek with words."

Brown stared at Igor like someone had just recited poetry at a bus stop.

Brown:
"…you ok, man?"

Ethan, however, froze. Not theatrically. Genuinely. Like a cat that suddenly realizes the vacuum cleaner has opinions.

Ethan (genuinely surprised):
“Igor, my **integral servant**, where did you pull *this* from?”

Igor blinked once. Calm. Neutral. Unpaid.

Igor:
“From the same place all inconvenient beauty comes from, master.”

Ethan leaned forward slightly.

“Which is?”

Igor allowed himself the faintest smile.

Igor didn’t look at anyone while he went on. He spoke the way appliances sometimes do right before breaking forever.

Igor:
“
A song is a shooting star
that sometimes turns into a comet,

a meteor of burning fire
yet as intangible as silk.

A song can open your heart
through reason or through feeling,
made of bread, wine, and sweat,
as long as a life, as brief as a moment.

You can shout it out of tune
when you're in a crowd, for sheer joy,
or whisper it barely hinted
when melancholy surrounds you,
and it brings back that silent song,
the woman who made you fall in love,
the lives you never lived,
and the one you wish you could forget.

A song is a magic box,
often stuffed with trivial things,
but if you weave it with tragic irony
it sweeps away useless refrains;

it's a manifesto you can fill
with things and faces to tell,
fragile lives to clothe again
and tiny stories to repay,

made of seven essential notes
and four chords stitched crosswise
over more-than-ordinary guitars
and a voice that is not a voice,

yet through lexical carom shots
it can become a prism of refraction,
crystal and philosopher's stone,
soaring in the air like a falcon."

Silence followed.
Dense silence. The kind that invoices you later.

Brown swallowed.

Brown:
"…are we… allowed to talk now?"

Ethan didn't answer immediately. He was staring at Igor like one does at an elevator that has suddenly started reciting Keats.

Ethan (quietly, still processing):
"Igor."

Igor:
"Yes, master."

Ethan:
"You do realize you just emotionally vandalized the room."

Igor inclined his head. Polite. Unrepentant.

Igor lowered his voice for the landing, like a pilot bringing down a plane full of unresolved emotions.

Igor (concluding):
"
Because a song can be born from a dark pain
that's hard to diagnose,

hanging between past and future,
there, present and ready to flee.

And the song becomes a stone,
a blade, a hammer, a powder keg,
that sometimes bites and strikes low
and sometimes waves like a flag.

You scream it on a day of rage,
throw it in the face of those you dislike,
a crowbar that opens every cage,
ready to mock those who sing
and those who stay silent.

Yet in the end it's made of smoke,
it wears the fabric of illusions:
fog, memories, sorrow, perfume."

The words settled. Not gently. More like dust after a small ideological explosion.

Ethan blinked once.

Then, carefully, as if naming a dangerous animal:

Ethan:
“Igor, my **function-limit servant for x approaching zero**, you may have unlocked something in the fabric of meaning.”

Igor nodded. No pride. No shame. Just a man who had accidentally weaponized poetry.

Brown, meanwhile, had been vibrating quietly for several seconds. Finally, resolution.

Brown picked up the cat o’ nine tails, gave it a respectful look, and began self-whipping with the enthusiasm of someone misunderstanding *everything* but committing fully.

Brown (already walking away):
“I’ll go pick some cotton now.”

From the corridor, fading but unmistakable, off-key and historically ill-advised:

Brown (singing):
“♫ gonna see miss Eliza, gonna go to Mississippi ♫”

Silence again.

Ethan exhaled.

Igor adjusted his posture.

No one addressed it.

Which, somehow, made perfect sense.

TWO WIDOWERS

Brown was kneeling in the mud like a man auditioning for remorse.

His sobs came in bursts—short, wet, accusatory—directed at a tombstone that refused to answer back.

ADELINE BROWN

Wife

Victim of culinary justice

Someone had left flowers. Someone else had left a note that read *"Béchamel is not optional."*
The SNIF had a sense of humor like a firing squad.

"She only wanted to experiment," Brown wept. "It was elbow pasta, Adeline. ELBOWS. That's practically Italian."

The wind moved through the cemetery with bureaucratic indifference.

A pair of polished shoes stopped just beside the grave.

Brown didn't look up at first. He assumed it was another mourner, or worse, an Italian.

"I'm sorry for your loss," said a voice, low, controlled, expensive.

Brown raised his head.

Ethan stood there, hat in hand, dressed in black so perfectly it felt like a performance. His face carried the kind of sorrow that had read the script beforehand.

Ethan knelt beside him.

"Adeline spoke to me about you all the time, Brown."

Brown's crying stalled mid-hiccup.

"You… you knew my wife?"

“Yes.”

A pause. Long enough for disaster.

“Are you… a relative?”

Ethan smiled faintly.

“Much more than a relative. Adeline cared for you deeply, you know…!”

Brown swallowed.

“But excuse me—who… who were *you* for her, exactly?”

Ethan’s eyes rested on the name carved in stone. He brushed imaginary dust away with his glove.

“What does it matter?” he said. “In the face of death, all that remains is understanding and forgiveness. We both loved her—and she loved us both. Me more physically, more carnally… you more spiritually, Brown.”

The sentence landed like a dropped plate.

“But—what are you saying?! She was—Adeline was—”

“That’s why my grief equals yours.”

Brown shook his head violently.

“Impossible…”

“We are brothers in sorrow, Brown.”

Brown stood, fists clenched.

“No, it can’t be. Adeline… Adeline, you of all people… but *WHERE*? *WHEN*?”

Ethan exhaled, slow and heavy, like a man remembering rooms with no windows.

“When?” he said. “It feels as if I’ve always loved her.”

Brown’s eyes widened.

“It was when I took that electronics course in Germany—wasn’t it?!”

Ethan’s jaw tightened. Almost imperceptibly.

“One should never go to Germany, Brown.”

Brown staggered back, face folding in on itself.

“But— but—”

Ethan opened his arms.

“Come. I have only one wish: to become your friend, and to grow old beside you, remembering our beloved Adeline—an incomparable wife and lover.”

Something ruptured.

“*INCOMPARABLE*?” Brown screamed. “INCOMPARABLE **WHORE**—WHORE, **SLUT**!”

He kicked the tombstone. Pain shot up his leg. The stone did not flinch.

Ethan moved fast.

“I won’t allow you to insult my Adeline!”

He seized Brown by the coat, pulling him close, eyes burning with a grief that looked dangerously sincere.

Behind them, half-hidden among the cypress trees, Igor watched.

He did not smile.
He did not blink.

He simply stared at his master with religious awe—witnessing, once again, how Ethan could enter a life, rearrange its furniture, and leave without ever unlocking a door.

Ethan released Brown gently.

“Control yourself,” he said softly. “She deserves dignity.”

Brown collapsed back to the ground, shaking.

“I didn’t know,” he whispered. “I didn’t know she had··· so much life.”

Ethan placed the hat back on his head.

“Few ever do,” he said.

They stood there in silence.

The tombstone said nothing.

SITTING AT THE DINER TABLE

Sitting at the diner tabl, they ordered breakfast like men preparing depositions.

Ethan didn't even look at the menu. Two fried eggs, sunny side up, yolks runny enough to count as a beverage, grilled ham, fresh tomato. Civilized. Balanced. A breakfast that said *I may be morally questionable, but I respect cholesterol with intention*.

Brown, by contrast, treated the menu as a cry for help. Fried chicken and waffles, grits, over-hard eggs—because if you're going to kill something, kill it twice and salt the corpse. Ethan watched him order the way one watches a controlled demolition: impressed, vaguely ashamed, certain there would be rubble.

Then Igor cleared his throat.

"I'll have egg, bacon, sausage and spam."

The waitress froze. You could hear the coffee pots listening.

“I’m sorry, sir. We don’t have any spam.”

Igor frowned, genuinely wounded, like a child being told clouds aren’t for sale. “Well. Then I’ll have spam, bacon, sausage and spam.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said again, patience visibly cracking around the edges. “As I said. We don’t have any spam.”

“But I want spam,” Igor replied, calmly, as if explaining gravity.

Ethan intervened, the way a diplomat steps between two nations armed with menus. “Why don’t you just have egg, bacon and sausage—without the spam?”

Igor emitted a sound that suggested deep existential distress. “Urghhh.”

The waitress inhaled, squared her shoulders, and went nuclear.

“Look. We have egg and no spam. Egg, bacon and no spam. Egg, bacon, sausage and no spam. No spam, bacon, sausage and no spam. No spam egg, no spam, no spam bacon and no spam. No spam sausage, no spam, no spam bacon, no spam tomato and no spam.”

Brown’s eyes lit up. This was his moment. He began chanting softly, reverently:
“No spam no spam no spam no spam…”

The chant took. Ethan joined in, against his will, like a man dragged into a cult by rhythm alone.

“No spam no spam no spam no spam…”

The waitress, now fully possessed by the spirit of total collapse, continued:
“No spam no spam no spam egg and no spam; no

spam no spam no spam no spam no spam no spam baked beans no spam no spam no spam…”

The diner trembled on the edge of something ancient and British.

“…or,” the waitress concluded, smiling with the serenity of someone who has burned all bridges, “Lobster Thermidor à la Crevette, with a mornay sauce, served in a Provençale manner with shallots and aubergines, garnished with truffle pâté, brandy, and a fried egg on top.”

Igor leaned forward. Hope bloomed.

“And spam?”

She snapped. “NO. We don’t have any spam.”

“Oh,” Igor said quietly, collapsing inward like a deflated cathedral. “Then never mind.”

Silence returned to the table.

Ethan sipped his coffee. Brown wiped syrup from his chin. The waitress walked away muttering things that would blister paint.

Breakfast had been ordered.
Civilization had failed again.

Getting out of the diner, they walked straight into a protest. Naturally. Riot police lined the perimeter like punctuation marks with shields, all rigid syntax and bad moods. In the middle of the square stood a massive block of polished metal, lucid as a mirror, ruptured from the inside as if a grenade had detonated in its soul and frozen mid-confession.

Brown squinted at it. “Look how they vandalized the statue. Imagine the cost of restoring it.”

Ethan grabbed him by the elbow, already tired. “That’s an Arnaldo Pomodoro.”

“Igor, no.”

Too late. Igor, fueled by pure civic responsibility and zero art history, was already marching toward the sculpture with an acetylene cylinder and an oxy-acetylene torch, eyes shining with the joy of a man about to *fix* something permanently.

"It's supposed to look like that," Ethan barked.

Igor froze. The flame hissed. The dream died.

Brown leaned closer to the sculpture, suddenly respectful. "Oh."

Igor slowly shut the valve, shouldered the cylinder like a disappointed hero returning from a war that never happened. "Oh," he said, pouting.

Behind them, the riot police watched in silence, unsure whether they had just prevented vandalism or a public art grant application.

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THE ROOM WAS ALREADY TIRED BEFORE ANYONE SPOKE

The room was already tired before anyone spoke.

Late afternoon light slumped through the curtains like it had missed several deadlines. Ethan sat in his chair with a glass that had once been respectable and was now merely functional. Mr Brown paced. Igor stood still in the way only Igor could—as if movement were a rumor he refused to confirm.

Igor cleared his throat.

“Master, I have something to say.”

Ethan didn’t look up. “Igor, my avant-garde servant, what do you have to say?”

Brown snapped his fingers, delighted by himself. "Oh, I know, I know what he's gonna say. Some racist joke, innit, Igor?"

Igor's face did not react. Not a twitch. Not a muscle. Absolute poker face. A marble bust that had filed for emotional tax exemption.

Brown grinned wider, encouraged by the silence. "I know, I know—like two blacks are in a car. Who's driving? The policeman. Ha-ha-ha."

He laughed alone. Loudly. With commitment.

Ethan slowly turned his head toward Brown, the way one turns toward a noise that might be structural failure.

"…?"

Igor remained perfectly still. Poker face. If anything, more poker than before. Las Vegas. High stakes. No blinking.

Brown wasn't done. Brown was *warming up*.

"Oh, oh… Oh! I know," he said, leaning forward conspiratorially, as if about to reveal state secrets. "He's gonna say what's the difference between a black and a wheel. When you put chains on a wheel it doesn't start to sing the blues. Aaaah-ha. Ha. Ha… Ha. Very funny, Igor."

Nothing.

No smile. No frown. No judgment. Igor's face was a wall. Not even a graffiti tag of disapproval.

Ethan reached for the bottle.

Ethan poured another.

The air thickened. Even the furniture seemed embarrassed.

Brown was on a roll now—the dangerous kind, downhill, no brakes, waving at pedestrians.

“Oh, oh, oh: must be this one,” he said, eyes lighting up with the joy of a man discovering fire while already standing in a burning house. “What the five white things the black has? White of the eyes, teeth, palm of hands, palm of feet and…”
He paused. Savoring it. A drumroll only he could hear.
“…the owner! Ooooohhh ha ha ha! Hysterical ha ha ha. What a fun!”

Ethan drank.

Not fast. Not slow. With the resignation of a man filing paperwork inside his liver.

Igor finally spoke. Same posture. Same face. Same emotional vacancy as a dead satellite.

“Master, my intervention is: ‘shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits.’”

The words landed cleanly. No emphasis. No flourish. Perfect timing. Like a guillotine engineered by a stand-up comedian.

Brown's body reacted before his brain could negotiate. Hands dropped. Shoulders collapsed. Ears metaphorically went down. A scolded dog discovering theology.

Ethan nodded, impressed. "Pure magic, Igor, my Carlinian servant. Pure magic."

"Thank you, master," Igor said, poker face intact.

Brown inhaled, courage bubbling up again, mouth twitching—

"Don't, Brown," Ethan said, not raising his voice. "Just don't. Between staying silent and leaving the doubt about being an idiot and opening your mouth and eliminating that doubt, you already made your choice. Don't make it any harsher."

ETHAN WALKED ALONG THE SHORELINE

The day had no intention of improving.

March had arrived at the beach like an auditor: no joy, no tolerance, just a clipboard and the quiet certainty that something was wrong. The shore lay empty—almost pointless—strewn with shells and pale shards of quartz, stripped of summer, evacuated of every idiotic, vacation-soaked symbol. No towels. No laughter. No bodies pretending not to decay. Just the beach in its underwear, embarrassed and honest.

A light rain had fallen without pause almost up to that moment. Not dramatic rain—no thunder, no cinema—just persistence. The kind of rain that doesn't argue, it simply stays. The sea beat against the wooden posts driven into the sand, then broke

apart into tatters, like it was tired of finishing its own sentences.

Inside the empty restaurant, the waiter stood near the window, absorbed, unhurried, decoding the rebus of the cumulonimbus clouds as if the sky owed him an explanation. He had all the time in the world and no reason to spend it. The sea was weary and bottle-green; the air, a gray room you couldn't leave because there was nothing outside it either.

The sea, as always, left behind its poor wreckage. Shipwrecks of tar. Rusted cans. Plastic fragments whose original purpose had long since resigned. The detritus of other people's summers, now demoted to evidence.

Ethan walked along the shoreline with his hands in his coat pockets, shoulders slightly hunched, as if apologizing to the horizon. He was looking for something stupid and unusual the storm might have washed up—an object with no explanation, no responsibility. A prosthetic leg. A message in a

bottle written by someone worse off than him. A sign.

He found nothing. Naturally.

He thought and thought and didn't understand. That, too, was familiar. You're supposed to know how to choose in time, they say, not arrive somewhere out of sheer contrariness, not mistake stubbornness for direction. You pay in full—and at inflation rates—for what they like to call maturity. No refunds. No receipt.

He remembered having revolt between his fingers once. It felt light then. Portable. There was no money in his pockets, but that had seemed negotiable. Time, on the other hand, had already been old back then, already a thief, already working overtime.

A gull landed nearby, inspected the sand, judged the entire operation insufficient, and took off again.

Ethan stopped walking. The sea kept going.
Someone always does.

He bent down and picked up a small piece of quartz, dull and chipped, nothing special—no magic, no history. He weighed it in his palm, then tossed it back where it belonged.

The rain started again, right on cue, as if the sky had been waiting for him to finish pretending to think.

Do you see it in the sky, that stubborn high pressure pressing down like an unanswered letter, do you feel this strange season that can't decide whether it's beginning or ending?
Do you hear the airplane dragging things far away—luggage, promises, entire versions of yourself that boarded without you?
Do you hear that sound, a piano somewhere behind walls, a detuned Mozart rehearsing and rehearsing, fingers insisting while meaning refuses to show up, like truth on sick leave?
Do you hear the *why* of wet courtyards, of cars

abandoned to grass and rust, left to die in fields because no one could be bothered to finish the story?
Do you see the noise of extinguished fairy tales, the static left behind when enchantment gets unplugged without warning?
Do you know that we are nothing anymore, not even an objection, just background?

Do you know the smell of deserted streets that lead to old discoveries—diesel and damp stone, warped frames, corroded smokestacks breathing their last relevance, the pull of mysterious outskirts, relentless rails going nowhere with absolute conviction, the intimate poverty of beds, of cots, of forgotten alcoves?
Do you know the color of low clouds, and the worn seats of a former third class, still warm with the memory of people who once believed arrival meant something?

Ethan thought, and thought, and didn't understand. Which wasn't a failure so much as a habit that had matured nicely with age.

Existence stood there with him, illicit and badly dressed, like contraband tucked under a coat—something you carry not because you want it, but because you forgot to drop it years ago. Always ready to run. Always pretending it wasn't stolen. Every age, he suspected, seals inside itself the proper rites of drifting: error mistaken for character, intuition dressed up as destiny, a long series of carom shots where nothing goes where you aim but something always gets hit.

There were games of deferral—*later*, *soon*, *after this*—and games of exchange: taking without knowing why, offering without remembering what for. Every day arrived free of charge, suspiciously generous, like a sample that hooks you for life.

Every night opened like a black hole demanding to be filled. He had never seen it filled. Not once. People tried—noise, bodies, ideas, sleep—but the hole stayed hungry, polite, professional.

All that remained was the usual scream. Not poetic. Not heroic. Just shouted. Trying and acting confused for courage.

Reason, meanwhile, was something people gave away cheaply, like spare change, leaving winning to idiots or to cheaters—often the same people wearing different hats. Champions emerged as if by clerical error, and somehow it was never Ethan's name on the form. It never was for people like him. For *them*.

They remained one step short. Always one. The half-submerged. The ones with broken faiths and bones that healed wrong. The ones who had

watched geniuses and magicians pour out in droves—brilliant, noisy, impossible—and then vanish without explanation, as if talent itself had a short shelf life and no return policy.

Ethan stood there, carrying it all like stolen goods, still unsure when the running was supposed to start.

Then he went into the restaurant with the big window planted directly on the sand, the kind of window that pretends transparency is honesty. He went in to bother the waiter and his cloud crosswords—cumulonimbus intersecting with boredom, cirrus clashing with resignation. The waiter looked up just long enough to acknowledge interference, then returned to the sky, which at least pretended to be complex.

Ethan ordered nothing at first. He searched instead. In an old café you always search—for a reflection, a

delay, a justification. He found a mirror. And inside it, the sea. And inside the sea, a small boat, bobbing with the seriousness of something that had a task but no instructions.

To reach another café, he thought, would be like stepping inside that mirror, where inside you see the sea, and inside the sea the same small boat, unchanged, rehearsing motion without progress. The man who rented the boats was also the owner of all the cafés—of course he was. He paid on this side and paid on that side. Rent a boat and have a coffee. Consume movement, consume rest. The invoice balanced itself.

Better to stay here, Ethan decided, and watch the planets swim—slow, indifferent orbs crossing the glass, pretending gravity was a choice. This wasn't the darkness of a riddle. It was worse. It was clear.

What is there at the bottom of this half-holiday of today, this almost-illness, this weekday pretending to rest, with couples drifting past frayed like gauze stretched against a dry autumn sky, people collapsing in a single breath without pain, without comprehension, while your thoughts amount to nothing more than a narrow gap between falling asleep and dying; what is there at the bottom of this night, when the hour of the wolf whimpers like a stray and the new day never arrives, never, and the dark turns into a distant whistle that refuses to stop, with minutes sweating their way forward and hours slicing like scythes, and your thoughts become just a dog in a church that everyone feels entitled to kick; what is there, really, what is there—tile-floored atriums of secondary stations where no one arrives on purpose, roads stacked on roads of solitary adventures that go nowhere but insist on being taken, clowns wandering at night after the audience

has forgiven nothing, empty suitcases packed with tricks for imaginary tragedies, remote controls for everyday hells, clever one-liners by postmodern architects explaining why nothing fits, lovers who left without closing the door, pleasures paid in installments with interest, abacuses clicking to count summers and winters as if time were arithmetic and not theft.

Igor appeared the way headaches do: unannounced, perfectly timed, and carrying a tray for no reason. Ethan was practicing the ancient art of staring at nothing with commitment, eyes fixed on a point that had resigned. Igor cleared his throat—an industrial sound, like a filing cabinet falling down a well—and said, gently, professionally:

"Master Ethan, the world is still there, mostly flammable, and very much in need of correction."

He proposed optimism by arson. Old churches first—the ones with stained glass that looked smug—then the newer ones that pretended to be gyms. Faith, Igor explained, burns beautifully once you stop believing in fire insurance. Ethan didn't move. Igor smiled anyway.

But at present let's take a walk around the block.

Igor continued, because silence makes him itchy. Belief systems, he said, were elaborate cardboard sets, begging for a match and a decent breeze. Brown would complain, obviously—Brown always complained—clutching imaginary pearls and getting offended on behalf of whichever pamphlet had last survived his attention span. Igor suggested including Brown strictly as a learning exercise: point, laugh, let him hold the extinguisher he wouldn't be allowed to use. Educational. Ethan exhaled. Igor nodded, satisfied with the exhale.

But at present let's take a walk around the block.

The plan expanded, as plans do when no one tackles Igor. Cleanse the skyline of steeples. Deprogram the bells. Teach pigeons new habits. Brown would ask whether this was appropriate. Igor would explain, slowly, with small words, that appropriateness died sometime in the Middle Ages and had been composted since. Brown would misunderstand and take notes anyway. Ethan's mouth twitched—a half-smile, provisional. Igor took it as consent.

But at present let's take a walk around the block.

Igor leaned in, conspiratorial, whispering logistics: matches by the gross, gasoline like perfume, choirs suddenly unemployed. He described collapsing sanctimony as soothing, like rain on tin. Brown would moralize and trip over his metaphors; Igor

would correct his grammar and his worldview in one clean sentence. Ethan rubbed his eyes. Progress.

But at present let's take a walk around the block.

Seasonal scheduling followed. Winter meant better flames—air crisp, hypocrisy brittle. Christmas especially: tinsel surrendering to smoke, carols replaced by the honest crackle of wood giving up. Brown would wail about tradition. Igor would pat his head, explain that tradition is peer pressure from dead people, and gently redirect him toward holding the ladder. Ethan sighed again, longer this time.

But at present let's take a walk around the block.

Promises were made, because Igor loves promises right before they're broken. Someday they'd finish everywhere—cathedrals, chapels, pop-up faith kiosks wedged between coffee shops. Brown would still be Brown, an anthropological exhibit with

opinions. Igor would still be Igor, a solution in trousers. Ethan stood up at last. Not convinced. Not healed. Just upright. That counted.

But at present let's take a walk around the block.

They stepped outside. The block was ordinary. The world, temporarily spared. Igor hummed something unholy and cheerful. Brown trailed behind, confused, already offended by a future he couldn't articulate. Ethan put his hands in his pockets and walked.

But at present let's take a walk around the block.

Ethan glanced at Igor with the faint gratitude one reserves for well-timed aspirin.

"Igor, my smile-on-the-Monna-Lisa servant. You always know how to cheer me up."

Igor inclined his head a fraction, the way portraits do when they're hiding knives. "I practice, Master."

Brown, who had been vibrating with unspent enthusiasm, took this as his cue—tragically.

"Boss, at words poetic, I'm so pathetic, but… *you're the top, you're the Colosseum—*"

Ethan raised a hand. The air itself flinched.

"Brown. Don't. Just don't. Leave Cole Porter alone, for the love of anything still vaguely sacred. You're late like a debutante's period after the cadets' ball—confusing, alarming, and nobody asked for it."

Brown blinked.

Ethan continued, mercilessly calm. "Be good. Take some swimming lessons. That way, when we shove you off the bridge, you'll float. Otherwise—purely

out of consideration—we'll have to drop you where it's dry."

Brown's shoulders collapsed inward. His ears—metaphorical but enthusiastic—drooped. He performed the full choreography of the scolded dog: tail between legs, eyes apologetic, dignity abandoned somewhere near verse two.

"Yes, boss," he muttered.

Without further protest, he turned and shuffled off to change into his swimming speedos, already ashamed of decisions he hadn't yet made.

Igor watched him go, satisfied. "Master," he said softly, "morale has been adjusted."

Ethan nodded. The world felt marginally less heavy.

They resumed walking.

PROSKYNESIS

Morning arrived the way subpoenas do: officially, loudly, and with no interest in Ethan's consent.

Ethan was seated at the table before realizing he owned a table. This was his usual trick—occupy furniture first, understand reality later. Across from him, Brown was already chewing something he shouldn't have been chewing this early. Igor was, as always, present in the ontological sense: not seen entering, not heard breathing, but undeniably there, like a clause you forgot to read.

Ethan stared into his coffee. The coffee stared back, empty of answers and rich in judgment.

"Right," Ethan said, clapping his hands once, the sound echoing as if the room had briefly considered being a courtroom. "Inventory."

Brown swallowed. Igor inclined his head one millimeter, which in his culture meant *prepare the ledger*.

Ethan: “Igor, my sugar-free servant, please do tell: we have been racist beyond reason, right?”

Igor: “Yes, master. We’ve been thorough.”

Brown: “VERY, VERY thorough, I must say.”

At this point Igor produced, out of thin air and without drama, a silver tray. On it: fried chicken, a watermelon, and a cheerful booklet titled LEARN TO SWIM IN A WEEK. The font was optimistic to the point of cruelty.

Brown squinted at it, nodded solemnly.

“That’s what I meant,” he said, accepting the tray anyway and immediately biting into the chicken, because ideology has never stopped lunch.

Ethan watched him for a second, then ticked an invisible box.

“Good. Next item.”

He leaned back, steepling his fingers like a man who had read exactly half a philosophy book and felt entitled to the rest of the world.

“Have we been misogynistic, Igor, my *Anabasis* servant?”

Igor executed a perfect proskynesis, forehead nearly touching the floor.

“We can do better, master.”

Ethan smiled. The smile of a general hearing there was still a hill left to burn.

“Then please indulge us, Igor, my *Achaemenid* servant.”

Igor stood. The room subtly reconfigured itself. Walls softened. A light appeared that did not come from anywhere in particular. Somewhere, a curtain realized it had always been a curtain.

Igor placed a hand on his chest like a Shakespearean actor who had been waiting centuries for this cue and began:

“Women looking for trouble, women beside a telephone that never rings, women stranded in the middle of a street, women adrift with no company; in their eyes women carry advice and a fierce hunger for adventure, and if women have made plenty of mistakes women are also full of fear. If women tell a lie, it is a truth that missed its appointment but will show up sooner or later; the wind changes, women do not, and if women transform a little it is only because women want to please whoever is already there or whoever might arrive. Women steal like thieves, but women are always women; women look after themselves, women can wait if women want, women are ahead

of their time, women never give out and never give in, women just change their minds, and women will promise more than the Garden of Eden, then casually cut and laugh while others are bleeding."

He paused. Let the air ache.

"In conclusion, members of the jury, Romans, countrymen… Women, du du du."

Applause erupted from an audience that had not existed thirty seconds earlier. Flowers, bras, and hotel room keys rained down. The kitchen was now unmistakably a stage.

Ethan stood and ovated, clapping like a man applauding his own alibi.

Brown, face shaped like a large, unresolved question mark, politely applauded from behind stage left, still chewing, because some habits survive revolutions.

ALPINE SOLDIER

Igor arrived the way lies arrive: confidently and holding paper.

Actual paper. Folded. Crackling. Yellowed just enough to whisper *archives* and *cigarettes*. He waved it with both hands, elbows high, like a town crier who'd misplaced his bell but kept the attitude.

Ethan didn't look up from the chair. He didn't need to. The lie had weight, texture, and the

unmistakable theatrical stiffness of a prop that had been paid union rates.

“Paper?” Ethan said. “Bold.”

Behind the newspaper, perfectly visible because Igor had never mastered *concealment*, a tablet glowed softly. Notifications blinked. Wi-Fi bars pulsed like a guilty conscience.

“The Early Hays Press,” Ethan added. “Prop department. Late forties. Early fifties. You can tell by the font pretending to be older than it is.”

Igor lowered the newspaper a millimeter, offended but professional.

“Very good, master,” he said. “Yes. One of *those*. Made of paper. Like it was the 1880s. For atmosphere.”

“For lies,” Ethan said.

“For *news*, master.”

Igor dropped the newspaper theatrically to his chest, revealing the tablet fully, as if the reveal itself were a moral act.

“Master, have you read the news about the last Alpini meeting, in Italy?”

Ethan finally turned his head.

“I have not, Igor, my metamorphic servant.”

Igor straightened. News posture. Voice adjusted to *grave but not surprised*, the tone used when humanity once again behaved exactly as expected.

“Hear hear, master: ‘Hundreds of harassment cases: outrage grows over the Alpini after the national gathering. As many as 150 testimonies have been collected.’”

Ethan blinked once. Then again. Slowly, like a man watching a piano fall in real time.

“Noo! At the Italian Alpini meeting?”

“Yes, master.”

Ethan leaned back, hands steepled, disappointment carefully rationed.

“The Alpini,” he said. “The high-mountain combat soldiers. Those famous for being strong drunkards and sleeping with their own mules.”

“Precisely.”

Ethan shook his head, wounded not by the news but by the lack of surprise.

“Who would have said so…” He paused, then squinted. “How does that Alpini choral go, Igor, my bemolle servant?”

Igor inhaled. This was recital territory. History through song. Bad history, worse song.

He recited, without blinking:

“Linda goes down to the ditch
The Alpine soldier jumps on her
And she loses her ring

And after nine months
A fine baby was born
And they called him Pierino

They made him become an Alpine soldier
And they sent him to the Grappa
They put him on patrol

They took him prisoner
The Bavarians caught him
And they sent him to Germany

The Alpine soldier drank it all
And he didn’t even get drunk”

Ethan nodded slowly, like a man cataloguing rot in a familiar wall.

“Right, right… The girl goes to the creek, the Alpino jumps on her, and she loses her ring.” He

tasted the phrase. "To *lose one's ring*. What a minimalistic, hermetical way of saying *raped and deflowered*. Almost Ungaretti. One noun, one verb, a whole crime scene politely folded and put in a drawer."

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Igor didn't correct him immediately. He never rushed to save a reference.

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And he recited, cleanly, without commentary, like a clerk reading charges:

“On this side, on that side of the Piave there is an inn.
There you can drink and eat, and there’s a nice bed to rest in.

And after having eaten, eaten and drunk well,
if you want to come, my dark-haired beauty,
now is the time to make love.

I might come, but just this once.
Still, I beg you, leave me be,
for I’m a girl meant to be married.

If you were meant to be married,
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You’ve always been with the old Alpini,
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And after nine months a fine baby was born.
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The room stayed quiet after that—not respectfully, just tired. The tablet behind the newspaper buzzed once, ignored.

Ethan smiled with the corner of his mouth, the one he used for archaeological irony.

"Oh, yes, yes. The verses, the meter… the *choice* of words," he said, rolling an invisible pebble between tongue and palate. "She says: *I beg you, leave me be*. Soldier replies: *you should have said so earlier*. Pure poetics of inevitability. Syntax as alibi." He tapped the armrest. "What a thrill to be a woman near such a strong, brave soldier."

Igor nodded, once. A professional nod. The kind you give when agreeing would be rude but disagreeing would be dishonest.

“Rather, Master.”

Ethan leaned forward slightly, warming to the subject the way academics warm to a massacre when footnotes are involved.

“You know, Igor, my Operation Barbarossa servant,” he said, “an old friend of mine is from Italy, and his grandfather was an Alpino. My friend swears his grandpa was the gentleman’s gentleman—never touched a woman other than his wife. My friend’s granny. A marble statue with a hat and a feather.”

Igor adjusted his grip on the tablet. The newspaper drooped uselessly now, like a retired lie.

“Yes, Master,” he said evenly. “I bet many sons and grandsons of Alpini say so about their grandfathers. Statistically curious.”

Ethan chuckled, low and dry.

“Statistics, Igor, my poultry servant, is the science of counting chickens while neglecting men.”

The tablet buzzed again. Neither of them looked at it.

PROSKYNESIS

Morning arrived the way subpoenas do: officially, loudly, and with no interest in Ethan's consent.

Ethan was seated at the table before realizing he owned a table. This was his usual trick—occupy furniture first, understand reality later. Across from him, Brown was already chewing something he shouldn't have been chewing this early. Igor was, as always, present in the ontological sense: not seen entering, not heard breathing, but undeniably there, like a clause you forgot to read.

Ethan stared into his coffee. The coffee stared back, empty of answers and rich in judgment.

"Right," Ethan said, clapping his hands once, the sound echoing as if the room had briefly considered being a courtroom. "Inventory."

Brown swallowed. Igor inclined his head one millimeter, which in his culture meant *prepare the ledger*.

Ethan: “Igor, my sugar-free servant, please do tell: we have been racist beyond reason, right?”

Igor: “Yes, master. We’ve been thorough.”

Brown: “VERY, VERY thorough, I must say.”

At this point Igor produced, out of thin air and without drama, a silver tray. On it: fried chicken, a watermelon, and a cheerful booklet titled LEARN TO SWIM IN A WEEK. The font was optimistic to the point of cruelty.

Brown squinted at it, nodded solemnly.

“That’s what I meant,” he said, accepting the tray anyway and immediately biting into the chicken, because ideology has never stopped lunch.

Ethan watched him for a second, then ticked an invisible box.

“Good. Next item.”

He leaned back, steepling his fingers like a man who had read exactly half a philosophy book and felt entitled to the rest of the world.

“Have we been misogynistic, Igor, my *Anabasis* servant?”

Igor executed a perfect proskynesis, forehead nearly touching the floor.

“We can do better, master.”

Ethan smiled. The smile of a general hearing there was still a hill left to burn.

“Then please indulge us, Igor, my *Achaemenid* servant.”

Igor stood. The room subtly reconfigured itself. Walls softened. A light appeared that did not come from anywhere in particular. Somewhere, a curtain realized it had always been a curtain.

Igor placed a hand on his chest like a Shakespearean actor who had been waiting centuries for this cue and began:

“Women looking for trouble, women beside a telephone that never rings, women stranded in the middle of a street, women adrift with no company; in their eyes women carry advice and a fierce hunger for adventure, and if women have made plenty of mistakes women are also full of fear. If women tell a lie, it is a truth that missed its appointment but will show up sooner or later; the wind changes, women do not, and if women transform a little it is only because women want to please whoever is already there or whoever might arrive. Women steal like thieves, but women are always women; women look after themselves, women can wait if women want, women are ahead

of their time, women never give out and never give in, women just change their minds, and women will promise more than the Garden of Eden, then casually cut and laugh while others are bleeding."

He paused. Let the air ache.

"In conclusion, members of the jury, Romans, countrymen… Women, du du du."

Applause erupted from an audience that had not existed thirty seconds earlier. Flowers, bras, and hotel room keys rained down. The kitchen was now unmistakably a stage.

Ethan stood and ovated, clapping like a man applauding his own alibi.

Brown, face shaped like a large, unresolved question mark, politely applauded from behind stage left, still chewing, because some habits survive revolutions.

ALPINE SOLDIER

Igor arrived the way lies arrive: confidently and holding paper.

Actual paper. Folded. Crackling. Yellowed just enough to whisper *archives* and *cigarettes*. He waved it with both hands, elbows high, like a town crier who'd misplaced his bell but kept the attitude.

Ethan didn't look up from the chair. He didn't need to. The lie had weight, texture, and the unmistakable theatrical stiffness of a prop that had been paid union rates.

"Paper?" Ethan said. "Bold."

Behind the newspaper, perfectly visible because Igor had never mastered *concealment*, a tablet glowed softly. Notifications blinked. Wi-Fi bars pulsed like a guilty conscience.

“The Early Hays Press,” Ethan added. “Prop department. Late forties. Early fifties. You can tell by the font pretending to be older than it is.”

Igor lowered the newspaper a millimeter, offended but professional.

“Very good, master,” he said. “Yes. One of *those*. Made of paper. Like it was the 1880s. For atmosphere.”

“For lies,” Ethan said.

“For *news*, master.”

Igor dropped the newspaper theatrically to his chest, revealing the tablet fully, as if the reveal itself were a moral act.

“Master, have you read the news about the last Alpini meeting, in Italy?”

Ethan finally turned his head.

“I have not, Igor, my metamorphic servant.”

Igor straightened. News posture. Voice adjusted to *grave but not surprised*, the tone used when humanity once again behaved exactly as expected.

“Hear hear, master: ‘Hundreds of harassment cases: outrage grows over the Alpini after the national gathering. As many as 150 testimonies have been collected.’”

Ethan blinked once. Then again. Slowly, like a man watching a piano fall in real time.

“Noo! At the Italian Alpini meeting?”

“Yes, master.”

Ethan leaned back, hands steepled, disappointment carefully rationed.

“The Alpini,” he said. “The high-mountain combat soldiers. Those famous for being strong drunkards and sleeping with their own mules.”

“Precisely.”

Ethan shook his head, wounded not by the news but by the lack of surprise.

“Who would have said so…” He paused, then squinted. “How does that Alpini choral go, Igor, my bemolle servant?”

Igor inhaled. This was recital territory. History through song. Bad history, worse song.

He recited, without blinking:

“Linda goes down to the ditch
The Alpine soldier jumps on her
And she loses her ring

And after nine months
A fine baby was born
And they called him Pierino

They made him become an Alpine soldier
And they sent him to the Grappa
They put him on patrol

They took him prisoner
The Bavarians caught him
And they sent him to Germany

The Alpine soldier drank it all
And he didn't even get drunk"

Ethan nodded slowly, like a man cataloguing rot in a familiar wall.

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